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Holt fenced in his range  
to guard the herd—  
but Marsham wanted both.  
So it meant—war!

# Prairie RECKONING



PAUL DURST



## *Blood in the Moonlight*

Holt struggled desperately, uselessly. They swarmed over him, overpowered him, and shoved him hard against a fence post. They tied him so that he was neither sitting nor standing.

"Take off his shirt!" someone yelled. "I want to see how this wire works!"

They ripped off his shirt and he strained against the ropes, but exertion only drew the knots tighter and clogged his mouth with a bloody froth.

Studdal approached, swinging several two-foot strands of barbed wire splayed at one end like a whisk, the other end held together with rope that let it swing freely like a cat-o-nine-tails.

The men pressed closer. "Go on, Ed. You go first."

Studdal grinned. "All right. I got a notion I'm goin' to enjoy this."

Holt braced himself for the shock, gritting his teeth.

Seven streaks of fire seared his back. The barbs tore through nerve and sinew and hot blood rushed down his back.

"Next!" Studdal roared.

Footsteps shuffled in the sand and another man took Studdal's place. This time there was no shouting. The sight of the bloody streaks—like black gashes in the moonlight—had a sobering effect.

The second man swung hard. Holt stiffened against his bands and groaned aloud. In the terrible silence it went on and on, the wires whistling, the pain rising to a fiery pitch.

Then blessed oblivion closed down.

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A Gold Medal Original by

PAUL DURST

*Cover Painting by Stan Galli*



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## Chapter One

THE RIDER SAT for a long time, one leg crooked around the horn of his saddle, elbow resting on his knee, the palm of his hand supporting his chin as he squinted into the distance. His face was thoughtful; the cigarette between his fingers dead and forgotten. The object of his gaze stretched before him two miles toward the horizon where it climbed the slope of a gentle rise and was lost in the shimmering heat haze to the north. The fence posts were stout cedar, newly cut, newly planted. Between them, fiddle-tight and glinting blue-gray, were two slender strands of barbed wire. He reached out casually with the toe of his boot and tested the wire. It responded with a low twanging sound that died quickly. Like a note of warning.

The rider smiled grimly, unhooking his right leg from the horn, and stirred his mount into a sleepy, jogging trot that sent little puffs of dust rising from beneath each hoof-beat. The dust hung for a while, forming a thin cloud that soon dispersed on the windless air and settled like powder on the parched grass. Two miles he rode, the unlighted cigarette dangling from his lips, still forgotten. He rode along the new wire, conscious of it always beside him, like a barrier. It was almost invisible, except for the posts dancing away in the heat. But a barrier still.

Down the long slope before him, where the fence marched sharply off to the west, a handful of men was gathered. They moved slowly in the heat, as men do who have a job they dislike. Beside the rider, the wire hummed faintly and through the shimmering blanket of heat came the dull-sounding thud of a hammer on a cedar post.

The men looked up at their foreman's approach, pausing to wipe the sweat from their foreheads on their already-soaked shirt sleeves. One held up something between thumb and forefinger and called out, "Last one, Holt. You're just in time."

Holt Shepway exchanged nods with the men as he drew the blue roan to a halt. Leaning cross-armed on the horn he smiled and said, "Let 'er go, Dan. Then we'll break open a keg of water and celebrate."

Dan Pardue hesitated, glancing down at the staple in his hand. "Durn shame it ain't a gold one, like the last spike on the U.P."

"G'wan, drive it!" Skeeter Andrews said. "Then maybe we can get back to drivin' cows instead of staples and fence posts."

Dan shrugged and swung his hammer, driving the staple deep with a single blow that made the taut wire sing. Then he drew back his arm and threw the hammer as hard as he could, watching it flash in the sun until it hit the ground in a puff of dust. The other Cross W hands roared with laughter, then dropped their own fence tools to the ground and squatted around their foreman, who dismounted and hunkered with his back to the post and began rolling a cigarette.

"I'm sure glad that job's done," Skeeter said, ruefully eying a blackened thumbnail. "I never thought a man could hit his thumb so many times just tryin' to fence four sections of grass."

"Then you'd better improve your aim a little or else grow yourself an iron thumb," Dan Pardue drawled. "I got a sneakin' hunch that bob wire is gonna be as much a part of ranchin' as a lass rope before long, don't you, Holt?"

Their foreman shrugged but said nothing as he fished a finger in his levis for a match. The other seven Cross W riders also kept silent, watching as he held the flaring match to his cigarette. It was almost a guilty silence, as though by stretching the taut strands that glistened into the distance they had committed some sort of crime.

Holt glanced down at his cigarette and said finally, "I guess nobody likes it particularly. But how else are you going to keep those critters from getting mixed up with the longhorn strain?"

The others nodded in tacit agreement, glancing at the



scattered white-faced cattle grazing beyond the fence. Skeeter plucked a blade of dry grass, drawing it thoughtfully between his teeth. "D'you reckon, Holt, that Old John knows what he's doin'?"

"You talking about the Herefords, or about the fence?"

"Well—both, maybe. Wasn't for them whitefaces there wouldn't be no fence."

"Holt ain't no fortuneteller, Skeet," Dan Pardue said. "I reckon it's anybody's guess how them cows'll make out. They tell me it rains nine months of the year back there in England where they come from." He chuckled and gave a nod of his head to indicate the parched grassland stretching brown and endless under the blistering July sun. "If they can hold up through a Panhandle summer they'll be damn lucky."

"I kind of hope they don't," Skeeter said quietly.

Holt glanced at him. "How come?"

The rider shifted uneasily under his foreman's gaze. "Hell, I ain't wishin' Old John no bad luck, Holt. You know that. It's just that—well, like I said, if it wasn't for them cows bein' fenced away from the longhorns, there wouldn't be no need for bob wire. I just got an uneasy feelin' about that wire for some reason. Kind of like the feelin' you get sometimes when you rope a bronc and the minute you get on him you can feel from the way he's a-tremblin' that he's just waitin' his chance. That chance might not come today, nor tomorrer, but sooner or later he's gonna catch you. I feel like that about that fence."

Holt gave a little chuckle. But it was a dry chuckle and had no humor in it. "You'll get used to it, Skeet. It's something new, that's all." But his tone lacked conviction.

"*We* might get used to it," Dan Pardue said, cocking a shrewd eye at his foreman. "Question is—what about them that's on the other side of the fence?"

"Clive Marsham, for instance?" Holt said pointedly.

Dan shrugged. "Everybody knows he's tried a couple of times to buy Cross W from Old John Fairbrother."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothin'—maybe. 'Cept that the last time he come down here with an offer to buy, Old John told him to get the hell off Cross W range and stay off. Marsham might figure that John's put a little spite into this fence. There ain't much water up on Marsham's Two Bar range. Come a good drought, Marsham's liable to find bob wire cuttin'

him off from the water holes along the Canadian River."

Holt stood up and ground his cigarette under his heel with a gesture of annoyance. "A four-section fence won't keep anybody from water," he said.

Dan smiled understandingly. "I ain't arguin' agin Old John, Holt. You know me better'n that. I'm just thinkin' a little ahead, that's all. We only got four sections under fence, now. But supposin' them whitefaces prove out? That fence is bound to grow."

Holt didn't answer. He pulled his hat down firmly, almost defiantly, and turned to gaze to the north, his back to the fence. Half a continent lay there, stretching from the Rio Grande, a few hundred miles behind him, to the Canadian border almost a thousand miles beyond the hazy horizon. A million and a half square miles stretching from the edge of the Kansas plains to the western sea. For more than half a century a man on a horse could cross that vast area as his fancy beckoned. A cowhand who felt the urge to see what lay beyond some distant ridge of hills could draw his pay when he chose, and ride until he cared to stop. It was part of his roaming nature, part of the life of freedom that made up for toil and hardship. But a change was coming.

Holt turned uneasily, glancing westward where the matchstick line of fenceposts faded against the distant sky. They had only fenced four sections. A puny corner of Cross W range; 2,560 acres out of 256,000. One part of a hundred. It wouldn't even be missed. Yet it was vital to the experiment; the propagation of a new breed of cattle which, if successful, might change the entire future of the cattle industry. It might bring wealth and prosperity to the very men, big and little ranchers alike, who eyed John Fairbrother's "foolin' around" as a threat to their future. And, in his heart, Holt Shepway knew that Dan was right about its permanence. With luck, the Hereford herd would grow. The bigger it grew, the more important barbed wire would become, the more fence would be needed. One day, perhaps not too far distant, the menace would become a reality and the entire Cross W range would be closed off. Soon the open range would go the way of the buffalo and the Red Man before it. The end of an era.

Holt turned back to his riders and found they had been watching, silently, thoughtfully. And he knew what they

were thinking. He glanced at the sun high overhead and said casually, "About time for chow, boys."

The fence was temporarily forgotten in the light, bantering talk and the sound of laughter among the Cross W crew as they squatted around the chip fire. Holt was grinning at a remark Skeeter had made and reaching for the coffeepot when Dan Pardue looked up. "Somebody's comin'," he said. "Looks like Frank Coster's rig."

Holt stood up, squinting a little in the bright sunlight. When he recognized Carol Coster on the seat beside her father, he unconsciously fingered the crease of his hat to straighten it and began slapping at the dust on his shirt and levis. Pardue noticed the gesture and gave the other riders an exaggerated wink. "Holt, there's some bootblack in my warbag on the wagon. I was figurin' on savin' it for church, but you're welcome to it." The others roared with laughter while Holt grinned and went to meet the approaching buckboard.

They exchanged greetings, Holt touching his hat to Carol and shaking hands with her father. "Been in to town, Frank?"

Coster nodded. "Carol decided we needed some new curtains. You know how that goes. Well, maybe you don't, bein' a bachelor. Anyhow, we got the curtains. Then she stopped to look at some ready-made dresses just in from Kansas City, and after the dress came a pair of shoes, and after that . . ."

"Good thing you told me, Frank," Holt said soberly. "I've been thinking about taking me a wife one day, but I don't know."

"That's the first I've heard about it," Carol said. "Every time the subject of marriage has come up when I'm around, it always seems that you start talking about cattle or horses or how badly we need rain."

Frank Coster laughed and Holt grinned and said, "Might as well get down, folks. There's some coffee and beans and you still got a long way to get home."

"Might not be a bad idea," Frank said gratefully, wrapping the lines around the whipsocket. "I'd counted on bein' home by noon, but by the time I'd finished payin' for everythin' I barely had enough strength left to drag myself out of town behind this team."

They went over to the fire and the Cross W riders said

howdy to Frank and touched their hats to Carol. Skeeter dished up their plates and brought coffee. As he ate, Frank Coster paid little attention to the conversation. His eyes left his plate repeatedly and gazed beyond the fence where a scattered handful of the new whitefaces grazed within range of the eye. Finally he indicated the cattle with a nod of his head and said, "What's John Fairbrother aim to do with them things, start a dairy herd? I never seen such critters. Why, they ain't got enough horn to hang your hat on!" He frowned with mock severity. "Holt, if any of my calf crop show up next spring with blaze faces, there's gonna be hell to pay."

Holt grinned at his neighbor. "You just keep your ugly longhorn cows away from our fence-line, Frank, and you won't be sent a bill for bull service if whitefaces show up in your calves."

Coster chuckled and Carol asked, "Are those the cattle they call Herefords, Holt?"

"That's right. Come from a place called Hereford, in England."

Her father gave an amused grunt. "Just as though there ain't enough cattle in Texas without sendin' halfway around the world for more."

Holt shrugged. "John Fairbrother figures the longhorn is on the way out. Too much grass goes into horn and bone and not enough into beef. He says we've got to compete with Eastern farm-raised beef for top market prices or turn this country back to the Indians. I don't know but what he's right."

"Is Old John back home yet?" Coster asked.

"No, he's still in Kansas City. Expect him any day, though."

Coster was watching the Herefords again. "They look like pretty good beef, Holt," he said honestly. "How do you reckon they'll fare?"

The younger man smiled a little grimly. "We've just been talking about that same thing. Like somebody said, it rains nine months of the year in England, or so I've heard tell. You know the Panhandle. We're lucky if we get nine weeks, all told."

There was silence for awhile, then Coster spoke again, a changed note in his voice. "See you got your fence finished."

Holt felt suddenly uneasy; he sensed the tension in that

simple statement. He knew there had been talk among the ranchers, lots of it, about John Fairbrother bringing barbed wire to the Panhandle. "Just finished it," he said casually. "Drove the last staple just before you came along."

"Wire don't just shut something in, Holt," Coster said quietly. "It shuts out, too. We been neighbors a long time."

Holt sighed and fished the makings from his pocket. "I'm just the foreman of Cross W, Frank." He rolled a cigarette and held the tobacco out for Frank.

Coster shook his head and said, "You got four sections fenced now. But if this breed proves good, all of Cross W could go behind wire."

"That's a long time off, Frank."

"Maybe not so long. And when it comes, what happens to men like myself who haven't got enough range and water?"

Holt could see the others watching him, silent, wondering.

"There's no problem can't be licked, Frank," Holt said sympathetically. "Some folks said the railroad would ruin everything. They said it would make it too easy to get cattle to market and that with everybody crowding out west to raise beef the market would drop. You know what happened—cattle've never been so high. It was a change; it turned out to be a good one."

"Barbed wire ain't no railroad, Holt."

"We've got to keep the strain pure if we want a good breed. Wire's the only answer. If this herd proves out, it might build a new market for cattle, just like the railroad."

"For them that can afford to switch over to Herefords, it might," Coster cut in gloomily. "But not everybody's as rich as John Fairbrother."

"Breeding stock always comes high, Frank. But once you get a breed established, the price is bound to come down within reach of everybody. There'll come a day, maybe, when whitefaces will be as common as longhorns. That means you'll get more beef, and less horn and bone, out of the same amount of grass."

"It ain't grass that's worryin' me, Holt. I can maybe lease enough grass to see me through. But if them whitefaces prove good, the bob wire'll stay. Stay and grow. That means the end of the open range. My leased grass is gonna

be patched in between somebody else's bob wire. And all the water's likely to wind up behind somebody else's fence. Then what's gonna happen to little fellers like myself that're still raisin' longhorns?"

Carol broke in quickly in an attempt to head off further argument. "I don't know," she said laughingly, "but I know what's going to happen to your supper tonight if you sit there all afternoon. I've got to make bread yet when I get home and it'll take time to rise." She took her utensils over to the wreck pan and washed them out and put them on the tailgate to dry in the sun. Her father followed suit, grumbling something under his breath about sassy females.

Holt followed Carol toward the buckboard and when they were out of earshot of the others she said, "You're coming to the dance at our place tomorrow night, aren't you, Holt?"

Holt grinned. "Sure, I'll be there—if you promise me the first dance."

"First come, first served," she smiled.

"I'll bring as many of the boys as I can, if it won't make it too crowded."

"I'd like a crowd. Especially since people are a little uneasy over the wire—you know what I mean. We've got the barn cleared and all our neighbors have promised to come. Dad got a new set of strings for his fiddle while we were in town today, so it won't sound as bad as the last time."

Holt laughed. "No matter how bad it is, this Cross W bunch won't know the difference. Not one of 'em can dance in time to the music, anyway. Myself included."

"You'll bring Chuck, won't you?" Carol asked hesitantly.

Holt's face sobered. "I don't know, Carol. Last time he got pretty drunk and started a fight with somebody."

"Maybe you still treat him too much like a kid brother, Holt. Chuck's growing up."

"Maybe," Holt said. "But he's still a kid and he's still my brother and I feel kind of responsible for that temper of his."

"Oh, let him come," Carol pleaded.

"I'm beginning to think it's Chuck you're anxious to see instead of me," Holt grinned.

"Well, if you can't trouble yourself to ride our way oftener than once every three months . . ." Carol said,

giving him a reproving look as she mounted into the buckboard.

Her father came up just then and they said good-bys and started off. Holt watched Carol as she turned to wave and he suddenly realized that he was letting too much time slip by where this girl was concerned. Six months since he'd kissed her at the Christmas dance at the schoolhouse down on Wolf Creek. And—Lordy, but she was right! It had been nearly three months since he'd last ridden down to see her. There were other men in Texas, and a girl like Carol wouldn't be around forever. Maybe he ought to have a talk with John Fairbrother when the old man got back. There was enough room in the big house for a family. Old John wasn't getting any younger, and, bachelor though he was, he might like the idea of Holt bringing a wife to Cross W. "

"Holt!"

Holt turned quickly. Dan Pardue was pointing off toward the west where a rider was pounding along the fence toward them on a lathered horse. Behind the rider, some miles away on the horizon, he could see a spiral of smoke winding lazily into the blue. A frown creased his face. The horseman, he saw when he looked more closely, was his brother. Chuck Shepway was four years younger than Holt, in trouble more often than out. Holt glanced back at the smoke, wondering what Chuck had stirred up this time. He began walking toward the group of riders and reached them just as Chuck pulled up in a cloud of dust.

"What's wrong, Chuck?"

Chuck gestured excitedly toward the smoke. "Somebody's busted out about half a mile of fence and stacked up the posts and burned 'em. Scattered all the whitefaces up there, too. Scattered 'em to hell and gone!"

## Chapter Two

HOLT FELT a tightening in the pit of his stomach. The last staple had been driven less than an hour ago and already there was trouble. He had expected trouble of some kind; but not so soon nor so violent.

"Who did it? Did you pick up any sign?"

Chuck nodded. "Four or five riders, headed north. Up toward Two Bar territory."

"Clive Marsham," Holt said tonelessly. Then he was silently thoughtful for a minute.

"Well, you aim to do anything, or are you just gonna stand there all day?" Chuck snapped impatiently.

A slight flush of anger mounted beneath Holt's tan, but his face remained stolid. He turned to Skeeter Andrews. "Skeeter, get in that wagon and get over to the north division camp. There's a stack of good cedar posts there and about a dozen reels of wire. Start loading right away." Skeeter moved off at a run and Holt faced his brother. "Chuck, get a fresh mount and head for the ranch. Bring up all the hands you can get hold of. Even the cook if you have to. Get 'em up here and get 'em up fast. You're in charge of the fence detail as of right now. I want that wire up today if it takes till midnight, and I want it tight enough to sing like a guitar string." He motioned to the others. "Dan, you and the rest of the boys come with me." He turned away, lifting his gunbelt from a fence post where he had left it, buckling it on as he walked toward the blue roan cropping at the bunch grass.

The younger Shepway spun his mount angrily, blocking Holt's path. "Now just a damn minute, Holt! If you think I'm gonna dig post holes and miss out on all the shooting—"

"That's just why you're digging post holes," Holt said evenly. "So there won't be any shooting if it can be avoided. I aim to prevent trouble, not start it."

"Damn it, Holt, when are you gonna stop treating me like a kid?"

"When you stop acting like one." He moved away before Chuck could broaden the argument and called to Pardue, "Ready, Dan?"



Pardue glanced at the other riders mounting up and nodded his head. "All set, Holt."

They picked up the trail just to the north of the Hereford fence, in Clive Marsham's Two Bar territory. Somewhere in the badlands to the west of Cross W, beyond the column of smoke from the burning posts, the scattered Herefords would be wandering. Holt left the chore of finding them to the men who would come after. He glanced briefly at the tracks the raiders had left in the dust, then looked to the north across the endless Two Bar range. Slipping his Colt from its holster, he opened the loading gate, spun the cylinder and inspected the load. His eyes met the gaze of the other riders. "Like I said—we're not out to start trouble," he said quietly, "but if somebody else starts it, let's make damn sure we get home to tell how it ended." He snapped the gate and dropped the Colt back in its holster, putting the blue into a fast lope.

Mile after mile they rode, fanning out to avoid each other's dust. Dan Pardue came up alongside Holt and said, "Wonder why Marsham would be the one to want to stir up trouble over that fence? In some ways, it don't make much sense. He's got the biggest range around here. He's got plenty of money. I don't see what he's got to lose by Old John's fence."

"That's just the point," Holt said. "He won't lose anything. But he's not satisfied with that—he wants to gain something. And that fence is going to help him; providing he gets his way."

"I don't get it," Dan said.

"He tried to buy the place. Twice. Old John wouldn't sell. Now Marsham probably figures that if he can make enough trouble over the fence, get everybody in Tomosa County stirred up over it, maybe he can force Old John to come to terms with him. I'm not sure just how. But I've got a hunch it's something like that."

Dan looked thoughtful. "Maybe. I hadn't thought of it that way." Then he said, "Funny feller, Marsham. Reckon there's any truth in what folks say about him? 'Bout havin' made his money in shady deals back East and comin' out here to get away from the law."

"I've heard one or two things like that," Holt said. "Wouldn't surprise me. I got my own opinion of any man who shows up real sudden and buys up a big piece

of range and starts acting like a cowman when he's nothing like one. Maybe it's that white shirt and string tie and black suit he always wears. And his hands—ever notice his hands, Dan? Soft. Long and soft and white. Like a woman's almost."

"I hear tell them hands is mighty handy with a gun, just the same," Dan said wisely. "And I hear he's used 'em more'n once since he's been here. Remember how he didn't buy all of Two Bar right off? Parts of it was owned by small one-horse outfits. Then one day the owners would turn up missin' and Marsham'd take over. Come to think of it maybe your hunch ain't far wrong."

Just under an hour later, they made a brief stop in the shade of some willows along a creek, staying just long enough to water their mounts and slake their own thirst. Then they mounted again and rode north, still following the trail of the five marauders. The sun beat down mercilessly, drying the sweat on the horses' flanks, heating metal and leather till they could smell it. Dust lined their mouths, gathered in the folds of their clothing. They rode swiftly and in dogged silence. ♦

Holt drew up suddenly and the others followed suit, glancing sharply at the undulating sage-covered hills shimmering in the heat haze. "There they are," Holt said quietly. He nodded in the direction of a shallow valley. Set among the bunch sage along the flats was a sod shanty with a pole corral. Five horses stood saddled outside the corral, nodding in the heat.

"Hell, that's a Two Bar line camp," Dan Pardue exploded. "If that's them, they're sure not taking much pains to cover who did it." ♦

Holt said nothing. He was remembering the look on Clive Marsham's face the last time he had seen the man near the depot corrals the day the Herefords had arrived. He had known then that Marsham, once he started trouble, wouldn't be very particular about hiding the fact.

They were less than a hundred yards away before the men in the shanty showed themselves. There were five of them and they came out one at a time, slowly, indolently, lounging carelessly along the wall in the shade as they watched the Cross W riders approaching. Holt rode in close and drew rein without dismounting. He let his gaze wander over the five, one at a time, and an uneasy feeling came over him. If these men were Two Bar hands,

they had been only recently hired. And not because of their ability with a rope.

"You men work for Marsham?" Holt said without preamble. The five looked at one another, deadpan. Finally one of them spoke up. He was a big man, thick-chested, heavy-featured. Everything about him was sloppy; his clothes were filthy with ingrained grease and dust, he hadn't shaved or washed his face for at least a week. Holt's eyes dropped to the Colt holstered low on the man's thigh and thonged down. The holster was shiny with much care, the gun itself was as clean as the day it was bought.

"That's right, fella," the big man answered. "We work for Marsham."

"Then you tell him that I rode up to advise him the next time he sends you down to rip up Cross W fence, he'd better damn well send somebody else along to carry you back."

The big man stiffened slightly, his hand moving near his gun. Then he saw that Holt's fingers were already curled about the butt of his own gun. The hand dropped away and the big man laughed. "Kind of touchy, ain't you, stranger?"

"The name's Shepway," Holt said. "Holt Shepway, of the touchy Shepways. We don't cotton to hired gunslingers coming in and tearing up high-priced fence, and you can tell that to Marsham when he comes around."

The big man took a step forward, grinning. "You talk kind of rough, Shepway. Maybe if I had anything to do with this business I might feel kind of upset. But I ain't got the slightest idea what you're talkin' about. We're just peaceful cowhands, tryin' to make an honest dollar." He turned to the other four and said, "Ain't that right, boys?"

"Sure," the others nodded, grinning. "Just hard-workin' cowhands."

The big man looked back up at Holt, still grinning. "Sure sorry to hear somebody tore up your fence, Shepway," he said with mock sympathy. "If there's anythin' we can do to help, why just let us know."

"Sure," one of the others said with a little laugh. "Just let us know, that's all."

Holt felt his anger rising, but he kept a tight rein on his temper as he weighed the situation. The Cross W riders outnumbered the gunmen seven to five. There the

advantage ended. The five men standing before the line shack were artists in their profession, men who hired out their skill because they enjoyed killing. Holt felt the responsibility for the men who were with him. So far there had been little damage done; a fence torn down, some cattle scattered. Not enough to warrant risking the lives of six good hands against professional gunmen. He'd found what he'd come for; he knew now where the raiders had come from. For the time being he was willing to let it go at that. He had made his point.

"All right," Holt said, turning the roan. "Just make sure you let Marsham know what I said, that's all."

The gunman's face darkened and his hand flashed out to grab the roan's bridle. "Now just a damn minute, mister!" he snapped, jerking the roan's head around and glaring up at Holt. "You come ridin' in here and made a lot of big talk. Now you're tellin' me to run errands for you." He was standing spraddle-legged, his big hairy hand dangling easily beside the butt of his gun. "I'll give you to the count of three to take back what you just said or else I want to see if you're man enough to back up that big mouth of yours."

The big man had planned it deliberately, Holt saw, now that it was too late. He had waited for Holt to turn the roan before grabbing the bridle, thus putting the horse's head between them in such a way that Holt was at the disadvantage of having to try to draw, twist in the saddle, and try to fire past the roan's head on the left-hand side. But the big man would have a clean target with Holt sitting up there in the saddle. Holt saw the grin spread over the man's face and knew he had been trapped.

"One!" the big man grunted.

Holt felt the sweat on his palms. With everything even on both sides he knew it would take more than a little luck to outdraw the man on the ground. As it was, the odds were impossible.

"Two!"

There was a metallic, clicking sound and Dan Pardue's voice broke on the air in a quiet drawl. While everyone's attention had been focused on the two men, Dan had slid his Colt from its holster. "Things ain't exactly even-Steven, mister," he said to the big man. He lifted his gun slightly with a quick movement and barked at the four men along the wall. "Don't try it, fellas. I got the seven-

year itch on this trigger finger of mine and this heat don't help it none. Reach up and take a hold of that sod roof over your heads—that's right. Now, keep 'em there." Then he turned to Holt and said, apologetically, "I didn't want to horn in, Holt, but it looks like your fat friend likes to play with loaded dice. Just thought I'd sort of even things up. What you want to do with him?"

Holt let out a little sigh of relief. Sliding easily out of the saddle, Holt asked quietly, "What's your name, mister?"

"Studdal," the big man said. "Ed Studdal."

Holt unbuckled his gun belt carefully and hung it over the horn. "All right, Studdal," he said calmly, "suppose you unbuckle your gun-harness and we'll take up right where we left off."

Studdal gave the foreman an up-and-down look, then grinned. Holt was half a head taller, but he was saddle-lean and at least ninety pounds lighter than the bulky gunman. Studdal placed a lot of confidence in the advantage of those ninety pounds. He unbuckled his gunbelt and tossed it aside carelessly. "Sure, Shepway," he said, spitting into the palms of his big hands and rubbing them together. "Anythin' to oblige."

Holt waited, knowing what was coming. Studdal would count on a quick rush, with the full shock of his bulky body behind it, a couple of sledge-hammer blows from those hairy fists, and it would be all over. He'd seen this kind of man fight before. And while the tactics might work in a saloon where weight could be put to good advantage in a limited space, Holt knew that the big man, dissipated by hard drinking and indolent living, would soon tire with half the Panhandle for an arena.

Studdal made his rush bull-like; head down, arms swinging. Holt saw the man laughing as he came in. His own face was grim, unsmiling. He waited until Studdal's fist fanned the breeze across his face, then he sidestepped with the swift footwork that had saved him from many a bronc's crashing hoof. He stuck out his left foot and as Studdal stumbled into it, Holt brought the palm of his right hand down hard, slapping the big man's hat down over his eyes and sending him sprawling in the dust.

Studdal got to his feet, a look of surprise on his face at the sight of Holt standing there calmly, untouched. The guffaw of laughter from the Cross W riders caused him

to purple with anger. The violence of his own whirlwind attack already left him breathing heavily. "So . . . you think . . . you're smart . . . huh, cowboy? Maybe you won't be . . . so smart . . . when I get through with you." He bent down quickly and unbuckled one spur, then straightened up, grinning evilly as he held it in his hand, the shank extending between the fingers of his fist. Wrapping the strap tightly around his hand he waved it at Holt. "Come on, cowboy—let's see how you like this!"

Holt glanced at the waving fist. The spur was a big Chihuahua, with a two-inch, five-pointed brass rowel. Driven by a fist like Studdal's, it could easily be thrust into a man's skull, or, with a few well-placed jabs to the face, could result in permanent disfiguration. It was a rough thing to face bare-handed. Holt waited for the man to charge again. All he wanted was a chance to get his hands around Studdal's wrist before he had a chance to use that spur.

Holt backed away, slowly, leading the big man on, waiting for the charge. Studdal came in with a rush, his spur-loaded fist cocked to drive at the foreman's face. Holt crouched, raising his arms as though to block the blow. Then, as Studdal drove the spur downward with a vicious grunt, he moved in swiftly under the downrushing arm, spinning as he came. He caught the man's wrist with both hands and heaved down hard, back to Studdal's belly, letting the force of the gunman's rush add to the leverage he applied to the arm. Studdal spun up over Holt's back, somersaulted once in mid-air, then landed heavily on his back on the hardpan flat, gasping helplessly for wind. Holt bent over him and plucked the spur from the unresisting hand. Holding the spur in his own fist now, he leaned close to Studdal's face.

"Y'know, Studdal," he said quietly, "I've got half a mind to let you know what it feels like to have one of these shoved through your face."

Studdal's eyes opened wide as the rowel poised for instant above his face. He tried to plead aloud, but the breath was still gone from his thick body and he could only shake his head and roll his eyes in terror. Holt laughed and stood up, flinging the spur into the sagebrush. Picking his gunbelt from the horn of his saddle he began buckling it on, glancing at Studdal. "I never have seen a snake show much fight if you pulled his

fangs," he said quietly. Then he mounted the roan and turned away. The other Cross W riders followed, covering their retreat until they were out of range.

Back in front of the line shack, Ed Studdal got unsteadily to his feet, watching the horsemen disappear over the crest of a rise.

"One of these days," he said hoarsely, "I'm gonna meet that Shepway when he's got no friends around. Then by God, I'll kill him."

### Chapter Three

ONCE OUT OF SIGHT of the Two Bar line camp Holt cut sharply toward the northwest. Dan Pardue rode up alongside. "Where the hell you goin', Holt?" he said uneasily. "We're gettin' deeper into Two Bar territory. Those boys back there are likely to stir up more trouble."

Holt shook his head. "I don't think so, Dan. They're planted at that line camp for a reason. I don't figure they're likely to do much until they're told to."

"You don't know Ed Studdal."

Holt glanced at him. "Who is he, anyway?"

"Just about the meanest bastard alive, that's all. I'd seen him once or twice back in Oklahoma. He's broke about every law that was ever made and some they ain't thought up yet."

Holt rolled a cigarette, licking the paper thoughtfully as he rode along. "Dan," he said finally, "you and the boys can ride on back if you want to. You've done what you came along to do. I just want to have a talk with Marsham, that's all."

Dan gave him a disappointed look. "Holt, comin' from anybody but you, that would be an insult. I ain't even goin' to mention it to the others. It'd hurt their pride somethin' awful."

Holt grinned, cupping a match in his hands. "By the way, Dan, thanks for working me out of a tight spot back there."

Dan gave him an owlish glance, then said soberly, "Y'know, Holt, sometimes I scare myself the way I get sneaky with a gun. I find myself practicin' sometimes when I'm all alone on line camp. Same thing happened once to a friend of mine. Fella was a bronc-buster; worked all alone most of the year. Got to foolin' with his gun, practicin', drawin' at shadows. Took a load of horses back to Kansas City one time, got a snootful of city likker and come back to his hotel pretty high. They found him dead in the hall outside his room. He walked straight into this big mirror at the end of the hall, figgered it was some other fella tryin' to push him around, and drew his



gun. Trouble was he'd got so fast with all that practice he outdrew his own reflection and shot himself dead. Scares me when I think about it."

Holt hid his grin and nodded soberly. Dan looked away and began to whistle quietly, off-key.

Clive Marsham was seated on the big veranda of the huge Two Bar main ranch house when the Cross W hands rode out across the flats. He came down to meet them, looking strangely out of place in his soft linen shirt and neatly pressed black broadcloth suit. "Well, well, Shepway," he said amiably, "what brings you this far north?"

Holt leaned on his saddle horn, gazing down at him. "I'm not going to mince words, Marsham," he said quietly. "Those five gunslingers down at your southeast line camp tore out a half-section length of Cross W fence just before noon and scattered some of our whitefaces. I told them that the next time you sent them down, you'd better send somebody along to carry them off while you're at it. I just thought I'd ride up here and tell you the same thing so's there'd be no mistake."

Marsham's face darkened. He plucked the cheroot from between his teeth with his left hand, letting his right hand drop to brush aside the black coat just a little. The movement was quick, but he made it seem casual. Holt stiffened, then relaxed when Marsham's hand stopped short of the gun beneath the coat.

"That's an accusation, Shepway?" Marsham asked softly.

"No, it's a warning."

"You saw my boys tear down your fence?"

"I didn't need to. I picked up their trail and followed it up to the line camp. That's all the proof I need."

"That fence of yours borders Two Bar range," Marsham said. "My boys have a right to ride on their own territory. Just because you found their tracks there doesn't prove anything. Anybody could have done it. Barbed wire's not very popular among the little ranchers, or haven't you heard?"

"Butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, would it?" Holt said casually.

"Meaning what?" Marsham's eyes narrowed.

"Meaning that maybe somebody might have talked folks into thinking that fence ought to be unpopular."

"A man's got a perfect right to express his opinion in this free land of ours," Marsham said, replacing his cheroot with a grin and talking around it. "And if I choose to publicly express my feelings about barbed wire in open range land, then that's my privilege. It's the little rancher who stands to lose if wire shuts him out of the open range. Myself—" he shrugged, removing the cigar from his teeth and waving it airily to indicate the colony of outbuildings and distant expanse of Two Bar—"I'm not bothered by the threat of wire. I've got plenty of grass and—"

"But sometimes not enough water," Holt said, interrupting. "You're on a dry bench up here, Marsham, and you know it."

"I'm sure I could always count on a neighbor who's got plenty to let me run my cows to his water if we ever get a bad drought," Marsham said shrewdly. "Even if he had to let down his fence to let them in."

"That fence won't keep anybody from water, Marsham. And if I were you I wouldn't plant that idea in people's heads."

"It won't keep anybody from water now." Marsham smiled thinly. "But who's to say how much that fence will spread in a year or two?"

"That's something I can't answer. But even if all of Cross W went behind fence, there's the whole damn Canadian river running clean across the Panhandle just twenty miles south of where you're standing. Anybody's welcome to help themselves."

Marsham chuckled. "Got it all figured out, haven't you, Shepway?"

"It doesn't take much figuring. Anybody can see that unless they let themselves get talked into not seeing it by somebody who might have a reason."

Marsham's smile faded. "I don't get what you're driving at."

"I think you do." Holt leaned forward in the saddle, jabbing one finger at Marsham for emphasis. "You tried to buy Cross W. You tried a couple of times, but you found out it's not for sale. Now maybe you've got another idea up your sleeve. And maybe what happened to that fence this morning fits in with that idea."

"Now wait a minute, Shepway," Marsham said angrily.

"You wait a minute—I ain't finished talking. Now listen real close to what I got to say. Somebody tore down that

fence, and it wasn't an accident. Well, that fence is going right back back up. And when it's up, it stays up. It might grow bigger and it might not. That's for John Fairbrother to decide. But it's going to stay up, even if I have to throw up another one with Sam Colt's lead to protect it. And if I was you, I wouldn't go around preaching so loud about how worried you are about what's likely to happen to the little ranchers. Because, Marsham, most of the little ranchers have already got a pretty good idea of what happened to some of their kind when you came to this country and built up Two Bar range."

This time Marsham made no attempt to disguise his feelings. He spat a curse between clenched teeth, and his right hand whipped aside the black coattail, closed over the gleaming gun butt. Holt's own right hand was in motion, lifting the Colt from leather when he saw Marsham stop.

"Try it, Marsham!" Holt said evenly.

Marsham glanced at the riders mounted before him, and he smiled a cynical smile. "I'd say the odds are a little in your favor, Shepway."

"You started the draw, Marsham, not me," Holt said dryly.

"And the next time I'll finish it—some time when you haven't got your whole crew along."

Holt shrugged, let his hand fall away from his gun. "Suit yourself. I'll be around awhile." He reined the blue around, nodding to his Cross W riders. They followed him out across the hardpan flats without a backward glance, while Marsham stood chewing his cheroot angrily, his face like a thundercloud.

"He ain't goin' to take that layin' down, Holt," Dan Pardue said as he rode up alongside.

"I don't expect him to," Holt answered. "But at least he knows that we won't stand being pushed around. Maybe he'll think twice about it next time."

"You goin' to write Old John and let him know what's happened? Maybe he ought to be comin' home, now there's trouble brewin'."

Holt was silent for a thoughtful minute. "Might drop him a line. Hate like the devil to bother the old codger, though. He's probably having himself a big time in K. C. But, on the other hand, he ought to be due home any day now."

"How you reckon he'll take this business, Holt?"

The Cross W foreman broke into a quiet grin. "Take it? Why I reckon he'll snort fire as soon as he hears about it. Especially that song and dance Marsham put up about the little ranchers. God and Texas knows there's never been anybody in the Panhandle who ever played more square with the small outfits than John Fairbrother. Just the same, that doesn't mean he's going to sit back and let people shove him around on his own range. Hell, Old John was punchin' cows out here in the days when you had to brush the Comanches aside to get room to light a fire. He's not likely to let go of something it took him forty years to build—not without a fight."

"You think there'll be a fight then?"

"That depends," Holt said slowly, "on Clive Marsham."

They rode on in silence, stopping near mid-afternoon for water and a smoke. A few of the riders joked and chatted as they sprawled in the shade of the willows. But the jokes brought little laughter and the talk was inconsequential. The tension was building up, and though no mention was made of it, outside of Dan's conversation with Holt, they all felt it lying around them, as heavy as the blanket of heat pressing down on the parched Panhandle.

Holt was thinking of Carol Coster as they remounted. He had already realized he had waited too long where Carol was concerned. If this wrangle over barbed wire continued to build up, Frank Coster might be forced to take sides. Cross W had been a good neighbor to Frank. But Marsham had been making a lot of talk, and Frank had listened like a lot of others. He had proved that by the remarks he had made earlier. If it came to a showdown, Holt thought uneasily, he might find Carol out of reach on the other side of the fence.

The sun was slipping westward when they caught sight of the repair crew working on the Hereford fence. Holt made a quick tally of the whitefaced cattle, noted to his satisfaction that none seemed to be missing. Just then he heard a shout and saw a rider streaking towards them from the repair gang. When the rider got a little closer Holt saw it was Joe Carney. As the man drew his mount to a plunging halt, Holt asked, "More trouble, Joe?"

Carney grinned and unbuttoned the flap of his shirt pocket. Taking out a rumpled yellow envelope, he handed

it over and said, "I dunno, could be. See what you think."

Holt looked at him queerly, then ripped open the envelope and took the folded telegram from inside it. It read: HOLT SHEPWAY, CROSS W RANCH, CLEAR CREEK, TEXAS. HOLT, GET THE HOUSE CLEANED UP NICE AND PAINT THE BUCKBOARD. I'VE MARRIED ME A WIFE. BE HOME TOMORROW. JOHN FAIRBROTHER.

## Chapter Four

IT WAS WELL after sundown when the Cross W hands arrived at the ranch and turned their horses into the corral. After supper Holt left the others and wandered down by the corrals where he squatted on the ground and smoked in the starlight. It had been a crowded day, and many thoughts stirred restlessly in his mind. But gradually, as he smoked and listened to the familiar night sounds of the plains, one thought shoved all others aside. It was the first time he had had a chance to turn his mind over to the idea of John Fairbrother having taken a wife.

He had been there a long time when a figure detached itself from the bunkhouse and came toward him. He recognized his brother as the figure drew nearer. Chuck came up and sat down beside him. For a long while they sat there in silence, but their thoughts were the same.

Neither of the Shepways could remember a time when they had not known John Fairbrother. The old man had found them where their mother had hidden them in a willow thicket along the Canadian when their wagon camp had been hit by the Comanches. That had been nineteen years ago. Holt, when he dug deep into his memory, had a hazy recollection of a woman crying and of being frightened by all the fire and shooting nearby. Chuck, a baby of twelve or thirteen months, of course remembered nothing.

They grew up calling Fairbrother "Uncle John," until their late teens when a man-to-man relationship reduced it to just John. But whatever their association lacked in blood kinship was made up by their silent affection. To the Shepway boys John Fairbrother had been mother and father, and more. He taught them all he knew about the ways of the range, and watched with pardonable pride as they grew to manhood under his tuition. There had been no doubt through the passing years that he intended one day for them to inherit his Cross W empire. And now, suddenly, after nineteen years, there was to be a change.

"What do you reckon she'll be like, Holt?" Chuck spoke quietly for the first time. His irritation with his older brother over the incident at the fence had come and gone, as it had many times over similar incidents in the past. Tonight, sitting there together in the starlight, both felt the ties of blood kinship lying strong between them.

"She'll be all right, Chuck," Holt said with a quiet smile. "She's bound to be a nice old gal. John Fairbrother wouldn't have any other kind. I don't think it'll change things much; not as far as the two of us are concerned. It'll be kind of nice for John to have a wife to look after him. He's not getting any younger, you know."

"Supposed he's been hooked by some widow woman with a pack of half-grown kids who turns out to be the bossy kind and tries to run everything?"

Holt chuckled quietly. "I don't think John's likely to be hooked by anything like that. I've got her pictured as a kind of sweet old grandma who'll fuss at John to keep his socks dry and who'll probably put about twenty pounds on his old carcass with some good solid cooking she learned on a Missouri farm. That's just about what John needs."

Chuck didn't answer and Holt stood up, yawning. "Come on, fella, let's turn in. We want to be sure and be on time for the train in the morning." He turned away toward the bunkhouse when Chuck stopped him.

"Holt."

"Yeah?"

"Supposing she's *not*."

"Not nice?"

"No. Supposing she's not old; not as old as John. What if he's gone and married some young thing that took his eye—maybe some fancy piece of fluff from a Kansas City dancehall or somethin'?"

Holt eyed his brother for a minute in the starlight. "You been out in the sun too long today, Chuck. Better come in and get some sleep."

Chuck got up slowly, brushing the dust from the seat of his levis. "It's happened before," he said quietly.

Holt was walking alone toward the bunkhouse. He didn't answer, because the same thought had plagued him ever since he had read the telegram.

The next morning when Holt stepped out into the early sunlight he was greeted by a chorus of good-natured hooraw and catcalling from the Cross W hands down by the corrals. He grinned self-consciously and glanced down at the sleeves of the black frock coat that had once been John Fairbrother's. It was too small for him, as were the trousers, but he felt that the dignity of the occasion demanded something other than ordinary working dress. He ran a finger around the neckband of the soft linen shirt and grimaced at its tightness. Turning toward the kitchen of the main house, he called loudly: "Maria!"

A middle-aged Mexican woman appeared in the kitchen doorway, dressed in her best black dress and drying her hands anxiously in the folds of her white apron. "Everytheeng is ready, Don Holt," she said eagerly.

Holt nodded his satisfaction as he glanced through the door at the spotless kitchen, sniffed the pleasing aroma permeating from the oven of the wood range and eyed the cakes and pastries lining the shelves.

"Well, she won't go hungry, that's sure," he said.

Maria beamed and said, "You look very handsome this morning, Don Holt. Very much the *caballero*."

Holt grinned and fingered his black string tie uncertainly. "You're just pulling my tail to hear me holler, Maria."

"Oh, no, *señor*! You look—you look *muy bonito*—very beautiful!"

Holt reddened slightly and turned away, touching his hat and muttering an embarrassed *adios* to Maria. He crossed the wagon lot to where Chuck sat waiting with the buckboard, a pair of saddle horses tied behind the tailgate for the return ride home. Holt mounted to the seat beside his brother, and amid further ragging from the riders beside the corrals they rolled out of the ranch yard on the fifteen-mile drive to Clear Creek.

Neither brother said much as the miles rolled beneath them. They passed within shouting distance of Dan Pardue and two riders from the north division camp just as they turned aside to avoid the corner of the Hereford fence. The fence kept Dan from coming close enough to be clearly heard, but he was shouting something and making motions to indicate that he had shaved for the first time in weeks. Holt laughed out loud when Dan cocked a leg over his saddle and slipped off a boot, holding up his



foot with a triumphant grin which was meant to indicate he had gone so far as to change his socks.

The first thought that struck Holt when they rattled into the dusty main street of Clear Creek was that there must be some sort of a celebration in town that he'd forgotten. Then he noticed how people seemed to be moseying toward the depot and he knew they were there for only one reason: to have a look at the kind of a woman who would marry a man who was almost seventy. Holt's jaw set in a grim line and he acknowledged the greetings of people they passed with a curt nod of his head. Morbid curiosity had brought them herē, and by sundown tongues would be wagging the length and breadth of Tomosa County. He rein-whipped the team to a faster pace and prayed, for Fairbrother's sake, that the old man had chosen wisely.

They arrived at the depot considerably in advance of the main crowd, but there were already a few people standing about the platform when they tied up at the hitch rack. Most of those who knew the Shepways made a point of coming over to say that they had just come down to say hello to Old John and wish him luck, but Holt accepted their too-pointed explanations with an impassive nod and turned away. He strode across the platform with Chuck at his side and waited at the far end with his back to the growing crowd, squinting out across the sun-browned grasslands for the first sign of the smoke plume that would herald John Fairbrother's return.

He and Chuck said little to each other as the depot clock beyond the window ticked away the slowly passing minutes. But there was a marked nervousness in their gestures and glances as they waited the arrival of the woman who could mean so much to both their futures.

The amicable relationship which had risen between them despite the fence incident of the day before was suddenly strained by a chance remark Holt made. The waiting was getting too much for Chuck. Suddenly he turned to Holt and said he was going to get a drink down at the Cattleman's.

"You better stick around, kid," Holt said abruptly. He said it without thinking of his tone, and without meaning any criticism. But lately Chuck had become more touchy than ever about being called "kid," and resented even the mildest advice.

"I'll do what I damn well please," he retorted.

Holt turned his head sharply to look at his brother. For a minute he couldn't attach any particular meaning to his remark, for he had forgotten what he had said to prompt it. "I didn't mean it that way, Chuck," he said, resolving not to let a row get started.

"No? Then you hadn't ought to say things you don't mean." Chuck gave him a defiant look and sauntered down the platform. Holt watched him cross the dusty street toward the saloon. Maybe, Holt thought, he was partly to blame. He made a mental note to stop riding the kid, to give him more rein. After all, Chuck was nearly twenty-one, and even though he might need a curb bit now and then there would come a time when he'd have to rely on his own decisions. Still, the incident left Holt with an uneasy feeling, as though it were a bad omen. . . .

Chuck returned some twenty minutes later. Though he said nothing, he seemed to be in better spirits. Holt wondered whether that was due to the whisky or to Chuck's satisfaction at having asserted himself.

A shout from the platform drove the thought from his mind. The train was coming. He glanced down the track, squinting against the heat haze shimmering above the rails. The train was only a speck in the distance, then it seemed to grow in size, thundering toward them, rocking and swaying along the rails. Now that it was almost here, Holt found himself wishing it would not come so quickly. The screeching of iron brakes and hissing of steam drowned the murmur of the crowd as the train roared in. Then there seemed to be a sudden hush over everything, broken only by the clanking of the engine's boiler. A tall elderly man with erect carriage and silver hair stepped briskly from the coach onto the platform. He glanced at the crowd, almost defiantly, then turned and extended his hand to help someone else alight.

Holt was conscious that he was holding his breath as a hand appeared. It seemed an eternity before the woman stepped into view. When she did, an audible murmur ran through the crowd and Holt heard Chuck draw a sharp breath beside him.

She was young, about twenty-five, and lovely. Lovely with a kind of beauty that is at once distant and appealing; haughty and enticing. Holt felt a stab of pain. He hated her immediately, not because of what her coming

might mean to his future, or to that of Cross W—but because she belonged to another man, a man whom he loved and respected.

He realized he was staring and that John Fairbrother was glancing around with increasing irritation, looking for some sign of Cross W. Holt stepped forward, pushing through the silent, gaping crowd, and swept off his hat, holding out his hand to John, trying not to look at her.

"Welcome home, John," he said, forcing a smile to his lips.

"Oh, so there you are!" Fairbrother said with a relieved laugh, shaking hands warmly. Then he turned to the girl. "Rhea, this is Holt Shepway, my foreman. Holt, this is Rhea."

She held out her hand and smiled and he took it. He felt himself tremble at the electric touch of her fingers so cool and soft against his calloused hand, and it seemed that in the brief instant their eyes met he saw something in her expression that shook him more than anything he had ever known. He felt awkward, fumbling, tongue-tied. "Welcome to Texas, Mrs. Fairbrother," he said in a voice that did not sound like his own. Then he dropped her hand quickly and he realized that she had smiled and spoken to him, but that he hadn't heard a word she had said.

"And you must be Chuck," Rhea said smiling, taking his hand. "John says you must teach me to ride—will you?" Her gaze was so innocent, so appealingly girlish when she asked Chuck the question that Holt felt he must have mistaken the way she had looked at him.

"Yes, ma'am," Chuck said with a delighted grin, "I'll be proud to teach you to ride!" The glance he gave Holt was one of triumph; slightly defiant, unabashedly proud at having been chosen instead of Holt for what promised to be a pleasant task.

Holt became suddenly aware that John was fidgeting as he glanced sideways at the crowd. "The buckboard's out front, John," he said. "Chuck, you bring the bags." Chuck glared at him and was about to say something when Holt turned to lead the way through the crowd. Holt realized that he had deliberately given Chuck the menial chore of the baggage out of a desire for revenge. He was conscious that it was a childish thing he had done. He had acted instinctively, without thinking, driven

by a desire to be near her. Silent, grim-faced now, he turned his attention to the crowd, unleashing on its curious, gaping members the fury he felt at himself because of his own folly.

John Fairbrother was angry too. He ignored the few spoken greetings as he led his young bride past his curious neighbors. He knew why they were there; he knew what was in their minds. Tongues would wag that night and there would be coarse laughter in Tomosa County. His sun-bronzed, weathered face was a defiant mask and his bared silvery head gleamed in the sunlight as, hat in hand, he helped her into the buckboard.

Holt took advantage of the tense atmosphere to avoid the conversation he knew he would have been compelled to make otherwise. There was a lot John should know. Marsham, the busted fence, Studdal. But the news would have to wait. He needed time to get over the impact of her, to get control of himself.

Walking behind the buckboard, he untied the blue roan and moved aside as Chuck staggered down the platform under the weight of a trunk. Ordinarily the younger Shepway would have growled at his brother to lend a hand. And, ordinarily, Holt would have obliged. But even had Holt offered help now he knew Chuck would refuse it, for he was busily making a show of strength for Rhea. Holt saw the quick sideways glance he gave to make certain Rhea was watching as he unloaded the trunk from his shoulders onto the buckboard as easily as some men would handle a suitcase. That single furtive glance brought Holt a second numbing shock of realization. Chuck was only a kid in wisdom, but he was a kid with a man's thoughts, a man's body, a man's desires. He was a latent keg of gunpowder, needing only a spark to explode. And Rhea might provide that spark.

The trunk and two suitcases were loaded and Chuck moved reluctantly to untie his horse from the tailgate. "Do you both have to ride horseback?" Rhea asked him. She glanced up at Holt on the roan, and he saw the mischief in her eyes. He sat stony-faced. "Chuck, you're a little smaller than your brother—can't you leave your pony there and squeeze up here with John and me? It'll let us get acquainted on the way home."

Holt glanced at Fairbrother. The old man was smiling his approval. Holt wondered if it had only been his own

mistrust of Rhea that had made him read something into her glance. Certainly John Fairbrother saw nothing; nothing more than the pleasant fact that his wife was not acting like a stepmother, that she was making a splendid beginning of fitting into her new home, her new family. There was nothing but pride and pleasure in the old man's face as he watched Chuck climb aboard.

But as they moved off in the direction of Cross W Holt couldn't help wondering if maybe almost a half century hadn't dimmed John's memory of what it was like to be a youngster of twenty and sitting beside a beautiful woman.

## Chapter Five

THE QUESTION of the Herefords and the new fence came up before they had got far out of town. While Holt would much rather have discussed the events with John alone, he figured that perhaps it wouldn't hurt Rhea to learn at once that there was a deadly serious aspect to the new life she had entered. So he answered the question with straightforward simplicity.

"There's been trouble, John. Half a mile of fence tore out the day it was finished. Looks like Marsham's work. Leastwise we trailed five men to his southeast line camp. They're new hands—gunnies. Led by a hardcase named Ed Studdal. Looks like they might have been hired for the occasion."

Fairbrother sat for a minute in stunned silence, looking up at Holt jogging beside the rig. "The Herefords!" he said hoarsely. "Did we lose any?"

Holt shook his head.

"Anybody hurt?" John asked.

"Not yet."

"When did this happen?"

"Yesterday. Just before I got your telegram."

"You seen Marsham since?"

"Yep. And this fella Studdal. Of course, they acted like they didn't know what I was talking about. But at least Marsham knows now that we mean business about that fence."

"Who is Marsham?" Rhea asked interestedly. "Is he another rancher?"

"Rancher!" Old John snorted. "Well, he owns a ranch, but he's no cowman. Bought a place just north of ours. See that line of hills yonder? His outfit starts there. Two Bar. Big place, but he ain't satisfied. Tried to buy me out a 'couple of times. Now it looks like he's trying something else." He snorted again. "No, I wouldn't call him a rancher."

Rhea glanced up at Holt as though confused by the notion that a man could own a ranch and still not be called a rancher. He gave a little smile of amusement and

said quietly, "There's a kind of unwritten law in this country, Mrs. Fairbrother, that says that no matter how many cows a man owns he's not a cowman unless he knows the meaning of hard work and sweat and has calouses on his hands. It's pretty hard to picture Clive Marsham as a cowman. His Eastern ways and white linen shirts and broadcloth suits just don't fit in somehow."

"In other words," Rhea said, "because he dresses and talks like a gentleman, you're suspicious of him?" She said it half-jokingly, half-seriously, casting a significant glance at Holt's own black suit and string tie. "I suppose he's what you would call a dude, is that right?"

"No, ma'am," Holt answered soberly. "But a lot of people have made that mistake when they first get a look at him."

"It'd be a mistake to underestimate Marsham at all," Old John said. "He's got money. Lots of it. Probably the richest man in Tomosa County. But money only means one thing to him. Power." John turned to look out across the rolling grassland toward the hazy hills marking Two Bar range. "And there ain't but one man stoppin' him," he said solemnly.

"Ope man? Who?" Rhea asked.

Old John turned to smile at his bride; a smile of fierce and stubborn pride. "Me."

"You, John? But I don't understand."

Old John waved his hand at the sweeping horizon ahead. "My outfit joins Marsham's on the south. A twenty-mile chunk of land straddlin' the Canadian. It ain't a big range, as big ranges go. But it ain't exactly a small one, either. There's four hundred square miles in a twenty-mile square. Two hundred and fifty-six thousand acres."

"And—how big is this man Marsham's?"

"'Bout three times that size. But that ain't the point. The thing that sticks in Marsham's craw is that Cross W's north boundary is just like a twenty-mile barrier cuttin' him off from the Canadian. Marsham's got grass. Plenty of it. But grass ain't enough without water."

"You mean he has none at all?"

In ordinary times he does all right. He's got a lot of little creeks and a couple of nice springs. But creeks and springs got a bad habit of goin' dry if we happen to get a little drought. Marsham can only run as many cattle as he can get water for. But, if he had Cross W he'd be

able to run three or four times the number of cows he's got now. He'd be one of the biggest men in Texas. And I reckon that's what Clive Marsham wants to be more than anything else in the world."

Rhea looked at her husband, puzzled. "But if he's so wealthy, why does he have to start trouble to get what he wants? You said he's already spoken to you about buying Cross W. If he's really interested, perhaps the next time he'll make you a better offer. It seems more sensible than all this talk about guns and everything."

Holt glanced at her with an amused smile and waited for Old John to answer. The old man shoved his hat back from his weathered face and spat into the dust rolling beneath the buckboard. "Buy Cross W? Well, he sure could afford to buy me out, lock, stock and chuck wagon. No matter what price I asked. The first time he came round he made me a good offer. I took it real good-natured-like and told him it wasn't for sale, even though he'd offered twice what it was worth. After a spell he came back and said he'd give me half that again—three times the value of the place, stock included. I just kind of laughed and said I had no intention of selling at any price. Well sir, when he comes back and makes it five times the money, I got kind of mad. A man's got his pride, after all. I told him what he could do with his money. More'n that, I told him I was gettin' tired of seein' him around, and that if he ever set foot on my range again I'd gunwhip him."

Rhea could not disguise her astonishment. "But, John! *Five times its value*. Surely with a profit like that you could have bought another ranch, someplace else and . . ."

Old John turned to look at her and she stopped when she saw the expression on his face. "There are other things than money, little lady," he said with a quiet smile. "Especially to a man like me who's reached the winter of his years."

He turned away from her as if glancing at some distant horizon none of them could see; a horizon lost in the haze of years. "I first came to Texas," he said slowly, "when it was just a young republic, newly cut off from Mexican rule. I came here with nothing but a saddle and a bridle and an extra shirt. It took me a long time to build that stake up into what I've got now. And it wasn't exactly easy. I've felt, more'n once, that it wasn't worth the



gamble and come near to givin' up. But, somehow I held it together. I held it against the Creek and the Cherokee and the Comanche. And when the war was done, and most people thought Texas was too—well," he sighed heavily at the remembrance, "those were bitter days, the Reconstruction. I reckon it was little more than guts and my own sweat held it together through them days. But it's mine now, this land. It's part of me and I'm part of it; my body and soul and my sweat and blood. No government nor howlin' Indian has been able to take it from me. And money least of all."

Old John's voice trailed off. Rhea smoothed her skirts self-consciously and murmured, "I see." Holt was silent, watching them both, wondering what effect Rhea would have on Cross W. A woman was the one thing with which John Fairbrother had had no experience. And this kind of a woman, a woman who could turn a man's insides to jelly with a single look, could in her own way wreak more havoc than all the Comanches who had ever threatened Cross W's feeble beginnings.

Supper that first night of Rhea's arrival was a banquet, a welcoming feast in her honor, and it was held in the cook shack at John Fairbrother's insistence because the tiny dining room of the main house was not large enough. "The first thing I intend to do is add a whole new wing," he told Holt. "It's time Cross W became something more than a sourdough spread."

Maria was thunderstruck at the suggestion that the new bride be served her first dinner in the grubby cook shack. She protested pleadingly in English, then violently in Spanish; but Old John was adamant. "She wants to meet the whole doggone Cross W family, as she calls it, and I think it's right that she does. Holt, you better send somebody to bring in the boys from the division camps. They'll still have time to get in by sundown if they hurry."

Holt frowned. "Do you reckon that's a good idea, John?" he asked. "I've got the boys keeping watch on the fence up at the north camp. The ones down the other side of the Canadian wouldn't get up here till pretty late. Maybe it might be better if—"

"Is it this man Marsham you're worried about, Holt?" Rhea asked.

"Yes ma'am," Holt said.

"Then why don't we ask him, too," she said, taking John's arm eagerly. "If we're going to be neighbors, perhaps it might help smooth things over. A little friendliness . . ."

"I don't think Clive Marsham's exactly the kind to be neighborly, Mrs. Fairbrother," Holt said. He said it more curtly than he intended and was immediately sorry. He realized that he had again spoken out of resentment for her being there, of trying to meddle in affairs which were strictly the province of men.

Old John was obviously perplexed, torn between his desire to please Rhea and still do what was in the best interests of Cross W. He made no comment about Marsham, but he did say, "Oh, I don't think it'd hurt for one evening, Holt. A couple of the boys can draw straws if you think we ought to keep watch on the fence. But after what happened yesterday it's not likely anything will happen again soon. Let the boys have a good time for one night."

Holt said nothing and turned away with a curt nod of his head. It wasn't like John Fairbrother to forget so easily what Marsham meant to Cross W. Holt sent a man south to bring up the crew from below the Canadian. But it was either caution or annoyance that made him volunteer himself to ride north and bring in Dan Pardue's bunch.

It was late afternoon when he reached the fence to the south of the sod-shanty camp and sighted Pardue's buckskin on the crest of a rise a mile or so inside the fence. He fired his Colt to get Dan's attention, then rode on in the direction of the gap-gate farther to the north. When he got there the rider was waiting, an anxious look on his face. "What's up, Holt? Anything wrong?"

Holt shook his head. "Nope. Mrs. Fairbrother's having a big spread for all hands tonight; kind of a get-acquainted dinner. You and the boys'll just about have time to ride on back and get cleaned up in time to eat."

"What about the fence?" Dan said. "What if that bunch of—"

"John says not to worry about the fence. He wants you all to meet his wife." Holt wondered if he had successfully kept the annoyance out of his voice.

Dan beamed. "Say, there's nothin' wrong with that, is there? I take back everythin' I said about havin' a woman

around the place. I'd rather be sittin' down there feedin' my face than up here nursin' cows and lookin' at barbed wire. What kind of a woman is she, Holt?" Then, as though he realized how that sounded, he stammered, "I—I mean—does she look like the kind that'll get along in this country? It's pretty hard on a woman, you know."

"She's a pretty nice girl, Dan," Holt said carefully. "Girl?"

Holt nodded. "She's about twenty-five." Their eyes met for an instant and Holt's gaze warned Dan against any comment. Though he might himself disapprove of the match, his loyalty to John Fairbrother was fierce and proud.

Pardue swallowed his surprise and glanced down at the toe of one boot. "That's mighty fine, Holt. She'll be good company for him." Then, anxious to change the subject, he dismounted and said, "Well, reckon we'd better get moving, hadn't we? Won't be enough grub left to feed a horny toad if that crowd gets a head start." He slipped the loop of wire from the gap post and led his horse through. As he started to draw the sagging wire tight again, Holt motioned him aside.

"Let me through first, Dan," Holt said.

The other looked at him strangely. "You're not comin'?"

Holt avoided his gaze as he rode through the gap. "Not right away. I want to take a look at those Herefords first. You and the boys go on. Don't wait for me, I might come in a little late." He raised his hand to Pardue and put the roan into a lope, heading for the crest of a rise well inside the fenced graze where he had seen the whitefaced cattle bunched. Pardue watched him for a minute, a queer expression on his face. Then he shrugged his shoulders and rode off for the line camp to collect the rest of his crew.

Holt rode on, aimlessly, not heeding the long evening shadows stretching across the rolling grassland. Before long he found himself up against the fence at the far boundary of the Hereford graze and he dismounted.

He made no attempt to analyze the reason for what he was doing; he only sensed that something was making him delay, deliberately, his return to the ranch house. With his back to the setting sun, he hunkered down and rolled a smoke, gazing far eastward where the first faint stars

heralded the coming of night. Away to the south, in some eroded canyon, a coyote wailed out its mournful yip-yipping cry. Lonely, eerie, a weird note of desolation in the vast, hushed emptiness of the plains. Though Holt had heard the same sound on a thousand starlit nights, it brought an involuntary shiver, as though a chill wind had swept across the rimrock. For the first time in his twenty-six years he felt completely lonely. He shook off the feeling and stood up, grinding the glow of the cigarette under his boot heel. Then he mounted and turned back, riding at slow walk.

It took him nearly two hours of meandering riding to reach the gap-gate where he had left Dan Pardue. When he had replaced the gate, he followed the fence south, still in no hurry to return, giving the celebration plenty of time to get under way. He thought once or twice of spending the rest of the night patrolling the fence, but each time he rejected the idea. It would look too much as though he didn't trust John's judgment; or that he was just acting peevish. The thought that both notions were correct made him smile wryly.

He reached the southwest corner of the fence, dismounted to stretch his legs and leaned back against the wire to light a cigarette. At first he thought the faint vibration was caused by the weight of his own body against the fence. And then he suddenly realized that the wire strands were quivering, slightly but noticeably, as though they were being moved by something or someone at a distant point. He straightened up quickly and peered eastward, straining his eyes in the starlight. But whatever the cause of the disturbance, it was beyond his range of vision. He ground out his cigarette and stood for a moment undecided. It might just have been a critter scratching its horns against the fence. Or—and the thought made him turn and mount his horse—it might be someone tampering with the fence.

Three miles to the eastward he found what he was looking for. At least a hundred yards of fence was gone, apparently ripped out by several riders using their reatas tied to their horns. No wonder the fence had vibrated. There was no attempt this time to burn the posts; the twisted strands with the posts still nailed to them had been dragged aside. Nor had there been any apparent attempt to widen the destruction.

He dismounted and examined the ground in the starlight. There were scuffed marks in the turf where the struggling ponies had dug their heels in for the pull. He sorted out the direction they had come from and he mounted and rode after them for a little way. There were eight riders, coming from the direction of the Canadian to the south. It could mean that Studdal had come back with more of Marsham's men to help him. Or maybe someone else had taken a hand in the game. He thought of trailing the riders further, then decided against it. It would be rough trailing in the gypsum rock country above the river and difficult to follow sign in the starlight. Besides, with things the way they were, it might be best to put the whole thing up to John Fairbrother and let him decide. It would be interesting to see what would happen.

Riding up to the end of the section of fence lying twisted on the ground, he dropped his loop over the first post and snubbed up short on his horn. The fence followed fairly easily and the roan held it fine up to the last ten or fifteen yards. Then Holt put the spurs to him and the blue snorted and dug at the turf, heaving and fighting against the weight of posts and wire. Holt paid out line around the horn, letting the roan gain headway and making for the nearest standing post while keeping the wire fairly tight behind. At the post he slacked off enough to fasten the rope, then spurred the roan again. A couple of half hitches held the wire and he dismounted to finish the job. It was little more than a sagging array of posts and wire that he left behind when he remounted, and the last twenty feet or so was only a strand of rope, but the gap had been closed and the Herefords would likely stay put until the fence could be rebuilt.

It was well past midnight when he crossed the creek and rode through the cottonwood grove surrounding the Cross W outbuildings. The shapes of the buildings emerged silent and dark in the starlight. Old John would be long asleep, and the story of the fence would keep until morning. He let the roan into the corral and unsaddled quietly. Then he stepped out and slid the bar behind him, crossing toward the bunkhouse.

Something moved beside one of the cottonwoods in the yard of the main house and he stopped. The figure emerged hesitantly, and he saw it was Rhea. She was

watching him. He waited, unmoving. Then she opened the gate and came slowly toward him.

"Holt, is that you?" she called softly. He was aware of the sudden pounding of his pulse in his ears. He moved slowly toward her, taking off his hat as he went. They met in the deep shadow of the trees and stopped a yard apart. He could see her face but faintly in the starlight filtering through the leaves above. For what seemed a long time to Holt, they looked at each other without speaking. Then Rhea broke the silence.

"You—you don't like me, do you, Holt?" she said in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

It jolted him. He had been prepared for almost anything; but not this. He wondered if his feelings had been so evident when they had met at the train. "I don't understand what you mean, Mrs. Fairbrother," he said awkwardly.

She smiled, and there was a touch of bitterness in her smile. "You consider me an intruder, don't you, Holt? You feel I've no right to be here, isn't that it? Why else would you deliberately stay away from the dinner John planned for this evening?"

He suddenly felt the childishness of the way he had acted, and immediately regretted it. Not so much because of her, but because of John. If he had noticed, too, he might have misinterpreted Holt's disapproval of his wife. He thought of defending his actions by telling her about the fence, but he changed his mind. To tell her, before he told John, would in a way give her an importance she didn't deserve.

"I'm awfully sorry about that, Mrs. Fairbrother," he said, and there was sincerity in his tone. "But when you work with cattle you've got to plan your life around theirs. Something unexpected came up and I had to take care of it. I'm sorry if I upset John by not being here."

"I was upset, too, Holt."

"Then I'm sorry for that, too."

She came forward a little and laid a hand on his arm. Holt felt the tingling sensation range through him at the touch of her fingers and he fought down the feeling that rose within him, fought it down angrily, despairingly. "Holt—can't we be friends? I want to be friends with you for John's sake. He has told me so much about you, and about Chuck. I feel I know you both so well. I know,

too, how close the three of you have always been. I wouldn't want to come between you, Holt. Not ever."

She dropped her hand and said with a sigh, "Oh I know what everybody will be saying about me being so much younger than John. I read it in the eyes of those people at the depot this morning. I thought I read it in yours, too, Holt." She stopped, as though waiting for him to say something.

"Who John marries is no concern of mine, Mrs. Fairbrother."

"Can't you call me Rhea?" she smiled. "We're the same family now."

"All right—Rhea. If people want to talk, let them talk. As for what you think about how I feel—I can't see that that matters much."

"But it does, Holt. It matters very much. Why do you hate me? Is it because you think I've made a fool of John? Or is it because you disapprove of the difference in our ages?"

"I didn't say I disapproved."

"Then maybe it's because you distrust me; you're wondering what made me marry a man forty-five years older than myself. Isn't that it?"

"I can't see what difference it makes what I think," Holt said sharply. "Now if you'll excuse me, ma'am, I've had a hard day and I think I'll turn in. Good night." He touched the brim of his hat to her and turned away.

He regretted losing his temper with her. He felt she had been egging him on to reveal how he felt about her coming to Cross W. And she had succeeded; that was what angered him most. That, plus the fact that he knew if he had stood looking into her eyes in the starlight a moment longer he would have taken her in his arms and crushed her lips to his.

It seemed he had barely closed his eyes when he was awakened by the early morning shuffle of activity in the bunkhouse. He rose and dressed and went outside to wash, shivering slightly in the chill of the pre-dawn. As he sloshed cold water over his face to drive the sleep from his eyes, his gaze was drawn to the lamplit kitchen window of the main house. He saw Maria bustling about the stove preparing breakfast. Then he caught sight of Rhea as she passed the window, a coffeepot in her hand, and he felt

the heavy, leaden rhythm of his heart pounding against his ribs. She came back again, this time pausing briefly to pull the net curtain aside and look out. For an instant their eyes met across the intervening distance. Holt turned quickly away, pulling his hat down hard as he walked swiftly toward the cook shack. Then he stopped, remembering the fence. John should be told. He glanced back at the house. The face at the window was gone now. He turned back and started through the gate and up to the front porch.

Old John was just sitting down to breakfast when Holt knocked. He called, "Come in," and Holt entered, taking off his hat and walking through to the kitchen. Rhea was there, standing beside John's chair. Holt nodded to her and said politely, "Morning, Mrs. Fairbrother." He turned to Fairbrother before she could answer and said, "John, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Old John reached up and patted his wife's hand on his shoulder and said to Holt, "Godamighty, son, she's family. If it's good news or bad she's got a right to hear." Then he fixed Holt with a steady gaze. "Anything wrong?"

"Somebody tore out another hundred yards of fence last night."

The elderly cowman's face darkened quickly. "The Herefords—we lose any?"

Holt shook his head. "I stretched the wire as best I could to patch it up. The herd's all right. I'll send up a crew to fix the fence right after breakfast."

Old John studied his plate thoughtfully. "What you think we ought to do, Holt?"

"Keep that fence patrolled after this. Tell the boys to use their guns if they have to. Let 'em know we mean business."

Rhea gave a little gasp. "Won't that start trouble?"

Holt glanced up. She had asked John, not him, but he answered anyway. "The best way to avoid trouble in this country, Mrs. Fairbrother, is to stop it before it starts."

"You reckon this was Marsham again?" Old John asked.

Holt shrugged. "Either that or somebody he's stirred up against the fence. Maybe he figures that if he can get enough of the little ranchers stirred up about the fence he can make enough trouble to force you to sell."

"But they're your neighbors!" Rhea said. "Wouldn't it be better to explain to them about the fence? Surely they



wouldn't deny you the right to keep your Herefords free from contamination. If you start using guns. . . ."

Holt glanced at her sharply. Was this her game—to try and drive a wedge between him and John Fairbrother?

Old John sighed. "Maybe she's right, Holt. This country's growin' up. Maybe it's time we learned to settle our talk some way besides using guns. He glanced at Rhea and smiled. "Maybe what we need out here is a few more women to teach us how to behave." To Holt he said, "Get the fence fixed. Tell the boys not to start any trouble. Maybe I'll ride up to see Marsham in a day or two and see if we can't settle this thing peaceably. Folks are bound to feel bad about the fence to start with."

"All right, John," Holt said grimly. "You're the boss." He turned away without looking at Rhea and left the house—left it with a feeling that he had been defeated.

## Chapter Six

OUT OF SIGHT of the ranch Holt slackened the blue's pace to a walk and rode aimlessly for a solid hour, letting his anger cool, and letting reason take hold of him again. She was a cunning, dangerous woman; but she was *only* a woman. He was a fool to let her affect him like this. He paused at the crest of a rise and gazed out across the rolling expanse of Cross W range. This was his range; he knew it like the back of his hand. He had worked and toiled and fought for it, and he feared no man nor any wild creature that had ever crossed it. Why, then, should he let himself be disturbed like this because of a woman?

Determined not to waste the ride that had taken him so far from the ranch, he swung toward the southeast to look for a bunch of Cross W longhorns reported drifted across the river. It was an aimless task, but it gave some pretense of purpose for his being there:

Along a dry creek bed he picked up fresh sign of cattle and began to follow it when his ear caught the ring of shod hoofs on rock and he drew up to listen. The horse was coming toward him from around a bend in the wide bed, hidden from sight by a high cutbank. A minute later a rider came into view mounted on a line-backed buckskin and he raised his hand in greeting as he recognized Carol Coster.

She drew up when she saw him and waited for him to ride up. The sight of her made the morning seem fine again to Holt.

"Morning, Carol," he said smiling, touching the brim of his hat as he reined in beside her. "What brings you out this early?"

"Just riding," she said quietly, her face unsmiling.

Something in the way she looked at him made his own smile fade. He glanced at her, a little puzzled at her coolness. She returned his glance with a look that was almost a stare of defiance, and something began to stir uneasily in the back of his mind. Something connected with her in some way. He tried hard to think what it could be.

Then it hit him.

"Oh, Lordy!" he said, feeling the embarrassment creep into his face. "The dance at your place last night. I clean forgot about it! I—I'm plumb sorry about that, Carol. I guess—"

"Don't bother, Holt," she cut in icily. "We hardly missed you."

"I guess you must think I didn't want to come," he began apologetically. "As a matter of fact I was counting pretty much on the chance to see you again. But we had a little trouble with the fence, and I guess you heard that Old John came back yesterday and brought his new wife with him. Well, I guess with all the ruckus over the fence and the hullabaloo over Mrs. Fairbrother coming and everything I clean forgot about the dance."

"I understand, Holt." Her voice was cool. "I was in town yesterday when she arrived. She's very beautiful, isn't she, Holt? Enough to make a man forget a lot of things." She reined her buckskin away suddenly in the direction of home. "I've got to be going. Maybe you might drop in and see us some day. If you can tear yourself away from—from your work."

He sat and watched her go, a proud figure riding fast and well, her honeyed hair catching the sunlight as it ruffled in the wind. He was still smarting under her insinuations, and he didn't know whether he was angry with her, or with himself—or with Rhea Fairbrother. All he knew right then was that he was just plain damn angry. He spun the roan around in a shower of sand and lit out the way he had come, riding as fast and feeling as unsettled as he had when he'd left nearly two hours before.

The rest of the day he spent in routine chores which carried him as far as possible from the main house and kept him out of contact with the other hands. At noon he shot a sage hen and cooked it over a brush fire, gnawing the bones clean in the realization he hadn't eaten since the day before. It was sundown when he returned, hungry and tired and a little subdued after a hard day's riding. He was just approaching the corrals when Joe Carney caught sight of him and came running up.

"Where you been, Holt? They been lookin' all over for you. Chuck got shot."

He felt the alarm pound in his veins. "Chuck shot? Is he bad hurt? How'd it happen?"

"He's in the house. They brought him back in the wagon. Shot through the shoulder."

"Who did it?" Holt said tight-lipped.

"Dan Pardue said it was that beefy fella you had the run-in with up on Two-Bar yesterday."

"Studdal?"

"Yeah. He came ridin' up when the boys was fixin' fence. Started proddin' them around. They didn't pay no attention to him at first. Then he said somthin' about them bein' dairy farmers, makin' fun of the Herefords. Called Chuck a damn milk-hand. Chuck went for his gun and the feller plugged him."

"Our boys get any of them?"

Carney shook his head. "Nope. They all had their guns hangin' on posts—guns get in the way when you're fixin' fence—all except Chuck. Time they got to them the others had rid off, and they had to get Chuck back here."

Holt heard the last of this over his shoulder as he hit the ground and ran toward the house. He had just pushed through the gate and started up the gravel path when a figure moved beneath the trees among the evening shadows and he recognized John Fairbrother. The old man's face was solemn as Holt stopped beside him.

"How bad's he hurt, John?"

"He'll live, Holt. But he's got a nasty hole in his shoulder. Might've touched the lung—we don't know yet." Then the old man's face darkened and he glanced toward the house where lamplight was coming through the window. Taking Holt's arm, he drew him out of earshot and said angrily, "Holt, why the hell did you put Chuck in charge of that wire-stringing detail? You know that temper of his—and just when we're trying to keep down trouble. You ought to have had better sense."

Holt felt his anger rising, but he choked it back and said, "I can't nurse the kid all through life, John. If we're heading up for trouble, riding herd on Chuck won't stop it coming."

The old cowman glanced at him sharply. "Trouble generally has a way of finding people who go looking for it," he snapped. Holt felt a jolt of accusation in the words, but before he could ask what was meant John said, "Better go on in and see him, Holt." Then Fairbrother strode rapidly away toward the corrals, as if anxious to avoid further conversation.

Holt stared after him for a minute, uneasiness and suspicion growing inside him. It was not like John Fairbrother to back down from a fight, or to place the blame wrongly where trouble was concerned. Something had begun to change John Fairbrother as nothing else had in sixty-eight years. Any other time, the old man would have saddled up and ridden off for Two Bar, bellowing a war cry and brandishing a loaded Winchester.

As Holt turned slowly back toward the house, he caught sight of Rhea's face at the bedroom window, watching him. He knew, then, what had caused the change. The feeling of uneasiness became tinged with despair as he mounted the steps and went through the door into the yellow glow of lamplight.

Rhea was standing outside the bedroom door, a lamp in her hand. Their eyes met; hers defiant against his glance of silent accusation. He knew she felt the safety of her position as the wife of John Fairbrother. He saw it in her smile, a taunting smile, challenging him to pit his authority as foreman against hers as mistress of Cross W.

"John Fairbrother never backed down from a fight in his life," Holt said slowly.

She raised her head a little, smiling wryly. "He's my husband," she answered quietly. "Do you think I would be doing my duty if I encouraged him to take his gun and go out looking for trouble as you seem bent on doing? This could have happened to him. He's not as young as Chuck. He wouldn't have survived the journey home."

She turned away and Holt watched her disappear through the doorway, his lips pressed grimly together. And once again he felt the danger of her and just as deeply sensed his own helplessness before it. She was driving a wedge between him and Old John. Slowly, quietly, she was placing herself in his way. He could see how it would grow, with Rhea presenting an obstacle at every turning. Anything Holt might want to do to stop her could be twisted by her to make it look as though he did it out of jealousy and hatred because she had cut him out of his own inheritance of Cross W. He sighed and turned to the open door of the bedroom.

Chuck was lying quietly on the huge brass bed, propped up on a mountain of pillows, pale but smiling. The smile faded when he saw Holt; obviously he had been expecting Rhea. Holt gave no sign that he had noticed.

"How do you feel, fella?" he inquired earnestly.

"All right," Chuck said self-consciously. "I suppose you've come to give me a talking to for losing my temper?"

Holt sat down on the bed and smiled at his brother. "Nope," he said casually, "you had good reason to get mad. You just picked on the wrong man, that's all."

"Is that the fella you tangled with yesterday—the one called Studdal?"

Holt nodded, lighting a cigarette and handing it to Chuck.

"Then you are responsible for what happened to Chuck," Rhea's voice said suddenly behind him. She had come in quietly while he was talking. He stood up, out of politeness, but he was seething inside. She went around the bed on the opposite side, carrying a plate of soup on a tray. Holt saw the way his brother's eyes followed her. Like a puppy's; full of adoration and, maybe, something else. He couldn't be sure. But it worried him. He stood there quietly, waiting for her to leave, wondering how to warn Chuck against the kind of woman he was sure she was.

But she made no move to go. Instead she said, "You seem very unconcerned about stirring up trouble that might bring grief to other people."

"My job as foreman, Mrs. Fairbrother," Holt said quietly, "includes protecting Cross W property when the occasion arises."

"You have proof that these were the men who tore down the fence?" She was smiling, taunting him. "You saw them doing it?"

Holt felt his temper slipping, kept it in hand with an effort. "I trailed them to a Two Bar line camp."

"But it could have been anybody—somebody who had deliberately ridden that way to throw suspicion on Calvin Marsham, couldn't it? Or didn't that occur to you when you rode up and accused what may have been perfectly innocent men?"

Holt's face was red. "Mrs. Fairbrother, I don't see why it's any concern of—"

"Drop it, Holt!"

Holt turned slowly to look at his brother. Chuck had risen on one elbow, brushing aside Rhea's protesting hands. He was trembling, his face angry, defiant.

"All right, Chuck," Holt said softly, picking up his hat.

"I'll drop it." He turned and went out the door, closing it quietly behind him. As he raised his cigarette to his lips he noticed that his hand shook. He walked through the house and onto the porch and flung the cigarette from him with an angry gesture, watching it shower sparks in the dirt of the yard. Suddenly he tensed to listen as the sound of hoofbeats came out of the night, growing steadily louder. He went down the steps toward the front gate.

A shadowy figure moved across the yard in the starlight and he recognized Old John. "Rider comin'," Fairbrother said. Together they went through the gate and stood outside, looking down to where the trail crossed the creek beyond the corrals. A rider came into view, a dark blob against the background of stars, slowing his horse as he neared the yard.

"Marsham!" Holt said suddenly.

John looked at him, his face stern in the starlight. "Take it easy, Holt," he warned. "There's been trouble enough for one day."

Holt turned away angrily and stopped to lean against a fence post; his fingers began tearing strips from the willow bark, throwing them aimlessly to the ground. He kept his back turned until he heard Marsham's greeting. Then he turned slowly, his jaw set in a grim line.

It had been a long time since Marsham had set foot on Cross W territory. The last time had been when he had offered John Fairbrother five times the worth of the ranch—and had been threatened with gun-whipping if he ever set foot on it again. Threatened by the same man who now stepped forward and greeted him affably.

"Evenin', Marsham," Fairbrother said. Holt wondered if he imagined the note of restraint in Old John's voice; as though the man might be making an effort to act cordially.

The manner of his reception took Marsham by surprise; obviously he had been ready to defend his violation of the mandate to stay off Cross W. "Why, good evening, Fairbrother," Marsham said uncertainly. Then, as though he might be afraid the friendly atmosphere might yet prove false, he hurried on to explain his visit. "I came over to apologize for—er, for the little mishap that took place this afternoon. Some of the boys apparently lost their tempers. I heard Chuck got hurt, so I thought I'd better ride over and see if there was anything I could do. I'd like to

straighten this thing out before there are any hard feelings."

Holt's eyes narrowed. There was something fishy here. He began to move forward slowly, his mind busily trying to figure out the reason behind Marsham's visit.

Marsham caught sight of him and nodded amiably. "Evening, Holt. Ever find out who busted up your fence?"

Holt stared at him for a minute, then he said slowly, "Hell, Marsham, right now I'm not even sure there ever was a fence."

Old John stepped in quickly and said, "Maybe Holt acted a mite hasty yesterday, Marsham. I'm not backing down—we still aim to protect what's ours. But I don't see any need to stir up bad blood when there's a chance to settle things peacefully."

Holt saw Marsham glance up quickly and remove his hat. He turned and saw Rhea had come through the gate behind him. Stepping aside to let her through, Holt looked up at Marsham's face and realized that this was the first time the two had met. And he didn't like what he saw.



## Chapter Seven

JOHN FAIRBROTHER made the necessary introduction. Holt watched his boss's face carefully, but if Fairbrother noticed anything in the way Marsham was looking at his wife he accepted it with pride rather than suspicion.

Rhea held out her hand and Marsham took it, holding it, Holt thought, longer than was necessary while she said, "I've been wanting to meet you, Mr. Marsham. Particularly since this trouble has started. I feel sure that there's no reason why we can't be good neighbors, is there?"

Marsham was at his best. He inclined his head in a mock bow and said smilingly, "I would feel it a tragedy if you and I were not the best of neighbors, Mrs. Fairbrother."

"Then, perhaps you'll stay for supper. Maria has a lovely roast of beef in the oven and it's nearly ready. Won't you join us?"

Marsham glanced at Old John as though not quite certain how this would be taken. The old cowman nodded, but Holt could tell he was a little surprised by the unexpectedness of Rhea's invitation. "Sure, Marsham, come on in and sit down. Be a real treat for you to eat good beef after what you raise up on Two Bar."

The three of them turned to enter the gate and Holt moved quietly away. Rhea turned and caught sight of him. "Holt, you've got to come, too," she said sweetly.

He stopped and looked at her. The last thing he felt like doing right then was sitting down to a table with Clive Marsham. Marsham knew that. Rhea knew it, too, damn her. But if he walked away now it would become obvious to Marsham that there was a rift between himself and John Fairbrother's wife. And it would not take Marsham long to exploit that rift. For the sake of his own pride, he wanted to refuse. But pride was no weapon to use against this woman.

"Thanks, Mrs. Fairbrother," he said casually, "I'd like to come."

When he took his seat at the table, Holt was determined to eat his way through the meal in silence, speaking only when spoken to. His annoyance at Old John for taking

Marsham at his word, his distrust of Rhea, and his downright dislike of Marsham himself made it almost impossible for him to trust himself in conversation. But it soon became pretty obvious that Marsham wasn't going to let it rest at that.

Marsham's nimble tongue and polished manners soon turned the situation to his own advantage. He complimented Rhea on the excellence of the meal and her ability as a hostess, and soon had Old John preening his feathers with pride in his new bride. When he had both of them smiling and laughing he began taking deft verbal jabs at Holt. He took care to make it seem like good-natured banter, but Holt felt the sting behind the words, knew that Marsham was trying to make him seem just another stupid cowhand in Rhea's eyes.

"I suppose you and your boys will have to start using a razor, eh, Holt—now that there's a lady around?" he said with a laugh.

"I'm foreman of a cattle ranch, Marsham," Holt said quietly, "not a barbershop."

Marsham chuckled and glanced at Rhea as much as to say, "Well, what can you expect?"

Old John looked up from his plate, ready to laugh at Holt's remark. Then he glanced at Rhea and saw her staring disapprovingly at Holt. He frowned and returned to his eating.

"You know, John," Marsham went on, "it's a pity you didn't marry sooner. I'm certain that the presence of so gracious a lady as your wife is bound to do wonders for this country. Why, I feel it's already brought our two ranges closer together."

"D'you reckon that's why somebody tore down our fence?" Holt asked. "So that they could get a little closer to Cross W?"

"Holt," Rhea said with a reproving smile.

"You oughtn't to have said that, Holt," Old John said. "Marsham's come here to try and be friendly. The least we can do it meet him half way."

"Looks like that won't be necessary," Holt said. "Seems to me he's made it all the way."

"Then so much the better," Marsham said with a forced laugh. "It makes things that much easier all around."

Holt looked up, ready to say something, then thought the better of it for Old John's sake. She was his wife, not

Holt's. But he wondered if the old man was just acting dumb, or whether he actually couldn't see the way Marsham was looking at Rhea.

Holt also noticed that the feeling seemed reciprocated. It was not just politeness to a neighbor that made Rhea look like that; nor was it prompted only by a desire to be nice to Marsham in hopes of keeping peace between the two ranges. Holt could almost see the workings of her mind, like a piece of smoothly oiled machinery, busily computing the extent of Marsham's Two Bar holdings. And, possibly, visualizing the expansive empire which might be accomplished by combining Two Bar with Cross W.

For Marsham's own part Holt could see that the man had used the shooting incident as a convenient excuse to investigate for himself what he undoubtedly had already heard concerning John Fairbrother's bride. Whatever he might have expected, it was obvious that he was unprepared for what he found. Holt felt his dislike of the man mounting, although he had to admit to himself that part of it was petty jealousy. Though he thoroughly hated the city-bred manners which seemed put on to a man who had spent his entire life in cattle country, nevertheless he felt his own lack of social graces all the more keenly.

It seemed ages to Holt before Marsham announced his departure. When the three of them said good night, he noticed again that Marsham seemed to hold Rhea's hand longer than was necessary. When the sound of Marsham's horse died away in the night, Rhea took John's arm and started back toward the house.

"He seems like a reasonable man, John," she said. "Maybe the only thing wrong with this country is that it has lacked a woman's touch for too long. You know, my dear, sometimes men let themselves be guided by their tempers instead of their heads. Most men are gentlemen at heart, and it only takes a woman's presence to bring out the best in them. I have a feeling that you and Marsham could have been friends all along if things had been different."

They had reached the porch now and John looked up at Holt, smiling proudly. "Y'hear that, Holt? Danged if I don't think maybe she's right." He turned to look in the direction Marsham had ridden. "Yessir, maybe she's got more sense than all the men on these two ranges put to-

gether. There goes proof of it. I never had any idea Marsham could be such a reasonable fella."

Holt was watching Rhea. She looked up at him and smiled. He thought he had never before seen anything so lovely as her face, soft now in the pale glow of lamplight. The night breeze stirred her hair gently and it glistened with a million soft blue lights, and her eyes came alive, sparkling. Holt felt the crushing weight of conflicting emotions in his chest. He told himself that he must be going crazy to feel that he could want a woman so badly and still hate her as much as he did right then.

Fairbrother turned and Holt looked away. "Holt," the old man began, "I think Rhea's right. Maybe we've been rubbing Marsham the wrong way. Sure, I know we've had cause to get our hackles up a couple of times, but maybe it's been our own fault as much as his. And with this new breed of Herefords being built up we need to pay attention to our work and not have to be pestered with troubles right and left."

Holt sighed heavily. "You're the boss, John," he said quietly. Then he started down the steps, gave Rhea a curt nod and a polite "Good night, Mrs. Fairbrother." He crossed the yard rapidly and through the gate before the anger welling up inside him could overflow. He was conscious of Old John's voice commenting on his abrupt departure as he crossed toward the bunkhouse.

He did not go in, however, but continued on, past the corrals and through the cottonwoods to where the creek murmured along in its shallow bed. He chose a quiet spot where a deep pool reflected the majesty of the brilliant starlight overhead and sat down heavily with his back against a tree. For a long time he sat there, staring. All manner of thoughts surged through his troubled mind. He would go to Old John in the morning and draw his pay, quietly, without explanation. There would be no need to explain. He was free. If he took a notion to move on someplace else, that would be his business.

He thought, suddenly, of Carol Coster. It seemed strange that she should come to mind just then. Certainly no person in Tomosa County figured less in his present mental turmoil than she. Or, did she? He knew he still smarted from her rebuff at their last meeting. But was that important now? Had she come to his mind because the thought of leaving would mean losing her; or had he thought of

her, unconsciously, simply because she was a woman he admired for what a woman should be in contrast to the kind of woman he found in Rhea?

And what about Rhea? If he left like that, without a word, she would have a quiet, triumphant laugh. Maybe, before too long, she would tell Marsham what had happened. Marsham was no fool. He could see that Old John would not live forever. He could see, too, that no woman Rhea's age would marry a man sixty-eight, giving up a life of Eastern luxury to do it, unless she had a good reason. And Rhea had been impressed by Marsham, Holt could see that. Marsham would lose no time in working that to his advantage.

Holt groaned aloud and gazed at the stars in supplication. If he left, now, to avoid further friction, it would leave Old John completely in Rhea's hands. Blinded as he was by his love for the woman, he would never be able to see that she was just waiting for him to die. And he would be ready to believe anything she told him about Clive Marsham.

He thought, too, of his brother. The kid was young and inexperienced. He would be putty in the hands of Rhea. With Chuck's emotions ruling what little common sense he had, a situation could develop which might send the old man to his grave with a broken heart if he ever found the two of them together.

Holt got up, slowly, resignedly. His mind was made up. No matter what it might cost him in pride, no matter how much it might hurt him to see things happen over which he had no control, he would stay on Cross W. He would fight the woman to the bitter end—as long as Old John lived.

The range remained strangely quiet through the weeks immediately following Marsham's first visit. The fence stayed up. There was no further sign of Ed Studdal and his hardcase crew. For that matter there was seldom a sign of any other Two Bar rider anywhere near Cross W Range. The Hereford herd prospered behind its protecting fence, apparently thriving on the hot weather and short bunch grass so alien to its native home.

Despite these peaceful signs, Holt Shepway felt a growing sense of uneasiness. He felt as a man feels in the hush before a storm.

In times past when he had found Cross W faced with a crisis, he had had no hesitancy in threshing it out with John. Or, if it involved the crew, a general council of war would soon clear the air. Thus, whatever the crisis, Cross W stood ready to face it as a single working—or, if necessary, fighting—unit, in solid agreement.

This time it was vastly different. Obviously Old John couldn't be consulted. And although the crew, from their silent looks and careful avoidance of any conversation concerning Rhea, gave indication that they knew there was something amiss, this was one time Holt could not call them into his confidence. It was a situation he must face alone. Eventually it began to wear on his nerves to such an extent that he decided to get a look at the picture from the outside. He saddled the roan and took the trail in the direction of the Coster ranch. He told himself that it was neighborly gossip he was after. But he had to smile when he admitted to himself that maybe he was more than a little anxious to find out if Carol had had time to cool off since their last meeting.

The Coster ranch consisted of a collection of sod-roofed cottonwood buildings nestled on a sheltered southern slope overlooking the broad valley of the Canadian. Despite its poverty of construction, everything about it bespoke the character of its owner. The long walls were neatly chinked and whitewashed, the pole corrals sturdy and in good repair. There was even a prim attempt at a kitchen garden beyond the house, although gypsum rock and the searing Texas sun successfully kept it from maturity.

Pausing on the rimrock ridge high above the slope, Holt noted, without regret, that Frank Coster and his meager crew of two riders were not at home. A bright patch of pink gingham moving between the well and the house told him that Carol was. He urged the roan over the ridge and left a trail of rapidly rising dust as he made his way down the slope.

She saw him coming and put the bucket down in the shade of the house and moved away a little so that the building would not hide him from view. He thought he saw her stiffen as he dismounted beside the corral and tied up. She waited without speaking as he crossed toward the house. It was the first time he had ever seen her in anything but a divided riding skirt, and as the hot Panhandle

wind hugged the gingham to her he decided that he much preferred her in a dress.

"Morning, Carol," he said, touching his hat brim. "Is your father around?"

He knew what the answer would be, but he didn't want her to think his coming was anything more than an accident.

"No." She said it firmly, then stood waiting as though expecting him to turn and go.

Holt took off his hat and drew his shirt sleeve across his forehead to wipe away the perspiration. He glanced longingly at the bucket she had been drawing from the well and said innocently, "Mighty thirsty riding today."

"Help yourself," she said flatly. "There's a dipper on the nail."

He walked over and filled the dipper, drinking long and slow, conscious of her gaze upon his back. But when he had put the dipper back and turned around she was looking the other way. Pulling his tobacco from his shirt he began to roll a cigarette. "Expect your dad back soon?" he said.

She gave him a hostile look. "Not till sundown. We don't keep our cows behind fence. When there's work to be done they have to be looked for."

He glanced at her over the flare of the match, suddenly alert. Was she just taking a dig at him? Or had this business over the fence begun to rankle Coster's kind? He decided that if he ignored it he would only look like he was trying to avoid the issue. With a shrug he said, "That's the way everybody does it, isn't it? All we've got behind fence is a few Herefords."

"That's all—so far."

This time he felt her hostility was genuine. He took a deep drag on his smoke and watched her closely. She returned the glance, defiantly. "Just what do you mean by that?" he said slowly.

She answered with a question, taking a step toward him. "Why did you want to see my dad? Are you trying to drag your friends in on your personal fights?"

For a second he stared at her in complete bewilderment. Then he broke into a slow smile and said amiably, "Look, I just got here. You mind bringing me up to date on what you're talking about?"

Again she evaded a direct answer. "Holt;" she said candidly, "did you come here to see Dad or did you come here to see me?"

He answered frankly. "A little of both, maybe. I just thought I'd chew the fat with Frank a little about what's been going on. And—well, I was kind of hoping you might have got over being mad at me for forgetting your dance that night."

She sighed. "I'm glad you told the truth. It's bad enough the way it is without making it worse."

Holt gave a perplexed grin. "Lady, you've talked riddles ever since I got off that blue roan. I'm not much good at all this cross-talk. Why don't you come right out with whatever's on your mind?"

Carol looked at him for a long moment. Then a smile touched her lips. A sad sort of smile, with a tinge of bitterness in it. "All right, Holt," she said quietly. "I'll tell you in plain words. There was a time when you could have come here and I'd be ready to believe anything you had to say. But not now. Not the way you've changed since *she* came."

Holt felt the muscles of his face tighten. But he waited for her to finish.

"I was there, Holt, that first day when she got off the train. I—I was jealous at first when I saw the way you looked at her. That was only natural, I guess. Being jealous, I mean. I had hoped that maybe you . . ." She colored slightly, left the rest unsaid, hurrying on. "The night you didn't show up for the dance I thought it might just be because you couldn't help it, that maybe you were busy with John Fairbrother coming home and all. Then that next morning when I met you and you had completely forgotten about coming here—well, I didn't have to guess what had happened."

"If you're trying to say that I'm in love with John Fairbrother's wife," Holt said angrily, "then you're wrong. I —" He stopped. Stopped just before he could say how much he hated the woman.

Carol gave him a pitying smile. "You might as well have said it, Holt. I know. You hate her now. Everything was going fine until Marsham stepped in, wasn't it? Now that she's found him you stand to lose everything when Old John dies; the girl, the ranch. Marsham will get them both." She started to turn away toward the house, saying



over her shoulder, "So now maybe you know how it feels to have somebody you care for throw you over for somebody else. Well, it's too late, Holt Shepway. Neither you nor your barbed wire can hold things together now. You—"

Holt seized her arm roughly, spun her around, his eyes blazing angrily. "So that's why you've been talking riddles! Where the hell did you ever get such crazy notions? What do you know about Marsham and John's wife?"

"I've got eyes; and so has everybody else. It's no secret that Marsham practically lives at Cross W these days. It's no secret, either about how you've turned sour, driving yourself and your men like crazy since she started seeing Marsham. What are you trying to do, Holt, prove to her you're a better man than he is?" She let her gaze wander over him disdainfully. "There was a time I thought you were a man. Now I wonder what it was that ever gave me that idea."

Holt pulled her suddenly closer, pressing his lips against hers. When at last he released her, he said quietly, "Maybe I waited too long to do that, Carol."

She jerked her head around and sobbed angrily through her tears, "Get out. Get out of here!"

She turned and ran inside the house, slamming the heavy door behind her. He stood there for a minute, motionless. Then, puzzled, hurt, and angry, he spun on his heels and strode across the yard to the roan. Mounted, he spurred out of the yard at a fast gallop cursing his inability to understand women. He rode over the ridge without looking back; but as he slowed the blue to a trot among the hills beyond he permitted himself a sardonic smile. She still cared. If she hadn't she wouldn't have acted like she did. But a lot of good that did him now. A hell of a lot of good.

The incident stuck in his mind as the summer wore on. Clive Marsham's visits grew more frequent during the weeks that followed. He found himself remembering Carol's remark; "It's no secret that Marsham practically lives at Cross W these days." He made it a point always to be leaving for somewhere whenever he spotted Marsham's arrival. Not that he was afraid of the man, for all Marsham's reputation for speed with a gun. That kind of a situation, he felt with something akin to regret, was

still a long time off. Holt's purpose in staying clear was to make certain that Rhea did not have another opportunity to draw him into her scheme; he did not want to sit quietly at John Fairbrother's table and watch while she and Marsham made unspoken plans with their glances and sly double-talk.

"Marsham's mighty interested in our Herefords now, Holt," Chuck said conversationally one day as they saddled up in the corral.

Holt watched his brother give an awkward tug at his stirrup leathers and wondered how he could talk so casually about a man who was responsible for the gunshot wound that still hindered the use of his arm. "If you ask me," Holt said quietly, "it's not just Herefords that Marsham's interested in."

Chuck dropped the stirrup he was holding and spun to face him, his features instantly dark. "Just what do you mean by a crack like that?"

"He's tried to buy Cross W a couple of times, hasn't he? Well, maybe now he thinks he's found a new way—if he can wait a few more years."

He turned to walk away, conscious that he had spoken something he had promised himself he wouldn't mention out loud until the right time.

He felt Chuck's fingers close over his arm and the younger Shepway spun him around. "All right, Holt," Chuck gritted, "why don't you come out and say it?"

"Say what?" Holt asked blandly.

"You know damn well what you meant. The only thing is, I can't figure out whether you're jealous of Marsham or whether you just hate her so much you've lost your sense."

Holt stared at him in silence for a long time. He could see that his worries about Chuck's susceptibility to Rhea's influence had been well-founded. And because she approved of Marsham, Chuck had forgotten everything he knew in his heart about the man.

Holt sighed and turned away. "Come on, kid," he said quietly. "Breakfast is ready."

September came, then October. Fall roundup was nearly over the evening John Fairbrother rode up to the Cross W roundup camp and dismounted. He took his place in line at the chuck wagon, carrying on a lighthearted con-

versation with his cowhands. After the meal was finished he called Holt to one side.

"Holt, how do you figure those Herefords have summered?"

Holt wet a cigarette paper with the tip of his tongue, smoothing the lumps out of the smoke as he sealed it. "Better than I expected, John. 'Course, it wasn't what you could call a real dry summer. Still, for wet-country cattle they stood up pretty good."

John nodded his satisfaction. "Just what I told Clive Marsham yesterday."

Holt felt himself stiffen at the mention of Marsham's name, but if Fairbrother noticed he gave no sign. Instead, he asked, "How many longhorns you holding down in that bunch on the flats?"

"Not many. Eight or nine hundred."

"That's what we decided to ship, wasn't it?" the old cowman asked.

Holt nodded, wondering what this was leading up to. Old John spat thoughtfully into the dust at his feet and glanced around him at the camp before turning back to his foreman. "All good beef?"

"The best we've got, John."

"How long will it take you to build that herd up to two thousand of the same quality and get 'em on the train for Kansas City?"

Holt's eyes narrowed slightly. He thought for a minute. "Two or three days. I'd have to cull some we just let go south of the Canadian." Then he added quietly, "That's a pretty big herd for us to ship this year, John. It'll cut us down on range stock for the spring market."

Fairbrother looked at him, a little smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "That's what I aim to do, Holt—cut down on longhorns. When you sell this bunch in K. C. I want you to buy up as many Herefords as you can—up to about five hundred."

More Herefords! Holt's mind snapped back across the weeks to early summer, to the last time he had seen Carol. She had predicted this would happen. And it wasn't just a guess; he knew that now. Somebody had been talking among the ranchers. Somebody who had an inside track at Cross W. Maybe somebody who wanted to sow fear of growing barbed wire among the little ranchers. Marsham?

Holt spoke. "Five hundred! That's a lot to take on,

John. A hell of a lot, considering we don't know how the ones we've already got will stand up to a Panhandle winter. I'd say winter this bunch through, see how they make it, then go ahead if they make out all right."

The old man shook his head firmly. "Holt, right now Herefords are bringing half again as much as longhorn beef on the market. With nearly six hundred head, counting the ones we already got, with a good calf crop by spring, we'll make a good piece of money. If we wait around to see how these winter we'll be sorry we don't have more when spring comes. It ain't cold these Herefords are likely to object to, it's heat. They've stood up to the heat all right. So now's the time to start building up."

Holt looked at him. This wasn't John Fairbrother's reasoning. The old man was willing to take a gamble, sure. Any cattleman had to gamble once in awhile. But not with a new breed that hadn't been tested in the lashing wind and sleet of the Panhandle. And the money angle. With John Fairbrother it had always been the practice to look out for the cattle first, letting the money take care of itself. No, this wasn't John Fairbrother's reasoning at all. It was Rhea's. Rhea's—and maybe Marsham's, too. It's easy to gamble with somebody else's money. You couldn't lose.

"A couple of days, you say?" John went on. "All right, bunch 'em up and head 'em for Clear Creek. I'll get word to Jeb Miller to get cars ready to pick 'em up on the siding."

"All right, John," Holt sighed. "You're the boss."

John eyed him sharply. "You've been saying that a lot lately, Holt."

"Have I?" Holt asked. "I hadn't noticed."

## Chapter Eight

HOLT CLIMBED DOWN from the corral after the last of the bawling, jostling longhorns had come down the chute from the cars. He handed his tally sheet to the yardman. "Here, mister," he said wearily, "you check that with yours. I'm tired of cows and trains. I want to find me a hotel with a bed and clean white sheets."

"You'd better pick a place close to the yards, cowboy," the man said amiably. "It's a lot cheaper. You get uptown and you might have to pay anywhere from six bits to a dollar for a room."

"How'd you know this was my first time in Kansas City?" Holt grinned.

"Because you're headed in the wrong direction. You walk very far that way and you'll get wet. The Missouri River's over there. You want to go the other way to the Exchange Building."

Holt laughed and thanked him, picking up his carpet-bag again and threading his way through the maze of pens, aware of the pungent aroma of the packing house rising strong above the more familiar smell of cattle.

He made his way in the deepening dusk toward the glow of lights beyond the yards, casting about for the sight of someone who might be able to direct him to a hotel. A man in city clothes, but wearing boots and a Stetson, came out of the Exchange Building smoking a cigar and glancing through a sheaf of papers in his hand. Holt stepped up to him.

"Mister, could you tell me where I could find—"

The man looked up, a funny expression on his face. His mouth opened, the cigar fell unnoticed to the ground. "Holt Shepway! Where the hell did you come from?"

Holt peered at the man's face in the dim light. Then he grinned and grabbed the other's extended hand. "Cal Bonner! All dressed up in city clothes and smokin' cigars!" He noticed the diamond stick-pin in Bonner's tie. "You look prosperous, Cal. Is that what happens when you stop punchin' cows for a living?"

Bonner laughed heartily and slapped Holt on the back. "Son, you catch on fast. Since I became a commission man I make more money in a day than your skinflint boss used to pay for a while month's ridin'!" Then he said seriously, "Say, how is Old John anyway?"

Holt's smile faded a little. "He's fine, Cal," he said shortly. Then he switched the subject. "What's this commission business you're in—are you one of these fellas who buys and sells cattle and charges money for it?"

"That's the general idea, Holt. But, listen, you look like you haven't found a place to stay yet. Why don't you bed down with me? I've got a nice-size room right close to the yards here with an extra bed. Come on along and we'll talk over old times, and while we're at it I'll see if I can't talk you into a new way of life."

He held out his hands as they walked under a gaslight. "Look at that—smooth as a baby's. No callouses, no rope burns, no scratches." He thrust one hand into his pocket and a jingling sound came forth. "Hear that? Them ain't pennies, son. They're eagles." Then he said seriously, "I'm not fooling, Holt. A man with your rep for honesty, and your savvy of cows, can clean up at this game. No more beans and cold biscuits for breakfast. No more ridin' into a northwester with sleet ripping your face to pieces. What do you say? I'll show you the ropes, there's nothing to it. All you got to do is—"

Holt stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and threw back his head and laughed. "Cal, give me time to get my feet on the ground, will you? I just got off a seven-hundred-mile train ride with two thousand head of longhorns and I'm still dizzy." He was still laughing when Bonner led him up a flight of stairs and into a well-furnished room. "Drop your bedroll anywhere, son," he said. "Take off your boots and start tellin' me all about it while I fix us a couple of drinks. Damn! Just imagine runnin' into you after all these years!"

They talked for a long time, reminiscing about the days they had known together when Cal had worked as a cowpuncher for Cross W. Then the talk shifted to Holt's trip, and Cal promised to see that Holt got top price for his herd the following morning. When Holt brought up the subject of Herefords Bonner looked at him shrewdly and said, "Herefords? I'd heard they were beginning to catch on with some ranges." He held a match to his cigar

and eyed Holt over the flame. "Whose idea is that? John Fairbrother's, or that fancy young wife of his?"

Holt's expression changed suddenly. All friendliness was gone from his voice as he asked, "What kind of talk is that, Cal?"

Bonner sensed the loyalty behind the change in attitude and waved a hand placatingly. "Hell, son—no use to get your dander up. If you don't hear it from me you'll hear it from somebody who doesn't even give a damn. Me? Well, I liked Old John. I hated to see it happen."

Holt felt himself gripping the arms of his chair. "You hated to see *what* happen?"

Bonner sighed and propped his feet up on the dresser. He studied the tip of his cigar for a long time as though trying to think how best to put what he wanted to say. Finally he glanced up at Holt. "How well do you know Rhea Conway?"

"Conway?"

"Well—Fairbrother, then. Conway was the name of her last husband."

A strange feeling come over Holt then; a feeling that he was about to hear something he wouldn't want to hear. Yet at the same time he felt it was something he ought to know. "I've seen her, that's about all," he said cautiously. "So, she was married before, huh?"

Bonner gave a wry smile. "You're a damn poor liar, Holt Shepway. I can tell by the look on your face that this woman has changed a few things at Cross W." He paused as though waiting for an answer to that, but Holt evaded the implied question and asked one of his own instead.

"This first husband—this Conway—what happened to him?"

Cal Bonner removed the cigar from his mouth and said slowly. "He was a wealthy banker here in Kansas City. She killed him."

Into Holt's mind flashed the memory of Rhea's face, smiling confidently. He thought of Old John, blindly in love with her, unconscious of the game she was quietly playing with Clive Marsham. And he thought, helplessly, of the seven hundred miles of plains that separated him from them now. He knew that Rhea had been waiting for something. He had wondered all along at Marsham's sudden change of attitude, the way the man

had apparently withdrawn Ed Studdal and his hardcases, the new "be friendly" policy with Cross W. Holt felt he knew, now, what they both were waiting for. He forced his mind back to the present, trying to concentrate on what Cal Bonner was saying.

"... obvious that the girl had her sights set on marrying money all along. She came from decent folks over in Independence. Decent, but poor. Rhea wasn't ever meant to be poor, not the way she looked at it. Anyway, she got into high society here in K. C. on the strength of her looks and personality. She was a looker all right."

"What about Conway?" Holt asked, conscious of his own impatience. "You said she killed him."

Bonner nodded. "Some folks said she killed him, hoping she could get away with it, because she knew his will left everything to her. If she did, she sure got fooled. He'd made too many unwise investments; was up to the ears in debt when he was killed. She didn't get a penny."

"Maybe she knew he was broke," Holt said slowly. "Maybe that was her way to get out of it."

"So's she'd be free to marry somebody who wasn't broke, huh?" Bonner said. "Somebody conveniently old, like John, who might die in a few years and leave it to her?" Then he nodded. "Yeah, a lot of folks thought that, too. That she found out he had no money and wanted out."

"But don't they have laws around here? Hell, even in Texas they hang people for murder."

Bonner laughed. "I thought it was only for stealing horses." Then he said, more seriously now, "She got off on a plea of self-defense. Said Conway had been playing around with other women and that she found out about it, asked him for a divorce. He refused, said a divorce would ruin him completely. When she insisted on it anyway, he came for her with a silver candlestick—one of those heavy ones you could batter down a barn door with. She potted him with a little derringer she kept conveniently tucked in a drawer of her dressing table."

Holt eyed him speculatively. "What do you think about that, Cal? Do you suppose that's the truth?"

His friend hesitated, staring at the ceiling as he leaned back in his chair. "W-e-l-l," he began slowly, "it's a good story, anyway. It convinced the jury. But then, you get a dozen men in a jury box looking at a woman as pretty



as Rhea, watching her sob into her handkerchief when she told what a bastard her husband was, watching the turn of her ankles every time she moved her silk skirts there on the witness stand . . ." He turned and smiled at Holt.

Holt got up and crossed to the window without saying anything. He rolled a cigarette and lit it, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs and staring out across the flats to where the lights of Kansas City dotted the hills beyond. She'd come from here, this woman. He wondered what secrets of hers those winking lights had witnessed. How deep was her cunning, that she could kill a man and sway twelve others to believe she had killed to save her own life? For there was no doubt in Holt's mind that the woman had lied. But this time she had been more shrewd. This time there would be no need for murder—unless she grew tired of waiting for the old man to die.

As the train rattled across Kansas and on through the plains of western Oklahoma towards the Panhandle, Holt Shepway made up his mind and changed it a hundred times. The train was still forty miles from Clear Creek when he finally decided. The woman was shrewd, cunning, deadly. She could blind men, drive them crazy until they could see nothing in her but what she wanted them to see. John Fairbrother would never believe the story. The best thing to do was to say nothing, and wait for Rhea to show her hand. Then . . .

The first person he sighted when he stepped off the train was Rhea. She was dressed as no woman raised in the cow country would have dared to dress. She wore tight fitting levis which accentuated the curve of hip and thigh, and brought long sideways glances from the cowhands standing about the corrals. Her checkered man's shirt was one Holt recognized as having belonged to Chuck. She wore the tail tucked tightly inside her waistband so that the tightness emphasized the prominence of her firm breasts. Her flat-topped Stetson hung from the back of her head by a string, Mexican fashion. With her was Chuck. As Holt swung down from the caboose, she came toward him smiling.

"Hello, Holt," she said, extending her hand to him in greeting. "Welcome home."

Holt ignored the outstretched hand and touched his hat

politely, turning to Chuck. "How many riders did you bring along?" he asked when he'd exchanged greetings with his brother.

"Five, counting myself and Rhea," Chuck said. "How many head did you bring?"

Holt looked at him for a brief second before he answered, feeling the impact of the way the kid had used her first name. "Five hundred," he said. "Didn't you get my telegram?"

"Sure, I got it. But knowing you, I wouldn't have been surprised if you'd decided to throw in an extra hundred at the last minute."

Rhea laughed. "John must have felt the same way, judging from the fence-building that's been going on since you left."

"How much is under fence now?" Holt asked, directing his question at his brother.

"Sixteen sections. All in the northwest corner. John figures that with any kind of luck with the calf crop we'll need more than that by spring. He's even talked about laying in enough wire to cover the whole northern division."

Holt noticed the way the cowhands from other outfits lounging beside the corrals glanced at one another. "That's a lot of bob wire," one of them murmured. Holt felt the implication that lay behind the words. In his own heart he could not blame these men for the way they felt. He felt it himself.

He shifted his gaze uneasily from the corrals to the little knot of people on the depot platform. "Where's John?" he asked Chuck.

He saw the look that passed between them, noticed the way Rhea seemed to be waiting for Chuck to answer.

"Why—he couldn't come, Holt," Chuck said uneasily.

"Why not?"

"Well . . ." Chuck paused, watching his brother's face. Then he blurted out, "It's nothing to get upset over, Holt. A horse stepped on his leg, that's all. He's laid up for a while."

Holt's eyes narrowed. John Fairbrother, for all his sixty-eight years, was still nimble. And far too savvy a horseman to get himself stepped on like a new cowpoke. He said slowly, "All right, Chuck, let's have it. What happened to John?"

There was a pause. Then Chuck sighed. "He topped off a rough one and got throwed. The bronc bucked over him and broke John's right leg. Could have happened to anybody."

Holt exploded. "Who the hell let him get near a bronc? Chuck, you know damn well he hasn't sat a rough one in nearly twenty years. Can't I leave you for five minutes without you—"

"Now just a damn minute, Holt!" Chuck snapped angrily. "Don't go trying to lay the blame on me. I tried to stop him, tried to argue some sense into him. But he's his own boss. If he takes a notion into his head to show Rhea how bronc-bustin' ought to be done, then I guess that's his business."

Holt turned his head slowly until his eyes met Rhea's. He could imagine how it had happened. The old man explaining to Rhea "how we used to do it in the old days. Now you take these kids today—why, they don't know any more about how it ought to be done than. . . ." And Rhea, full of feigned admiration, egging him on while pretending not to; playing on his pride until the years rolled away and he felt like a kid again.

Rhea looked back at Holt unsmiling. Her face was devoid of expression, but it was her eyes that told him what he wanted to know. "Tell me," those eyes seemed to be saying, "tell me that I did it to get rid of him. Tell me. I dare you."

Holt looked away. "Chuck," he said, his voice husky, "get this herd moving as soon as you can. I think I'll ride on ahead." He turned away and walked past the depot to where the blue roan waited for him at the hitchrail. When he looked back Rhea was still standing there, watching him. Chuck had gone and she was alone. He thought she was smiling at him, but it was a long way and he couldn't be sure.

## Chapter Nine

OLD JOHN lay abed with his leg in plaster all through the long weeks of autumn while the rolling Panhandle grassland took on its coat of winter brown and the winds began to blow more sharply out of the northwest. The Hereford fence enclosing the additional fourteen sections went up without incident, and Holt had cause to wonder at this when he found that Ed Studdal and his hardcase crew were still on the Two Bar payroll. Hired gunmen never stay long on a peaceful range. There must be a reason.

It was a little past noon on a day that was unseasonably warm for December when Holt thought he discovered that reason. He had left the line camp on the Hereford graze and was riding south toward the main ranch when he sighted Marsham heading north just outside the Hereford fence, riding in the direction of his own range. Rhea was riding beside him. Holt watched them for a long time until they disappeared. As he urged the roan over the edge of the rimrock he felt a chill creep down his spine in the warm December sun.

Old John seemed restless when Holt walked into the bedroom and sat down. They talked aimlessly for a while, Holt reporting the progress of the Herefords while the old man asked unimportant questions. Then Holt summoned up his courage and said as casually as he could.

"Saw Marsham riding for home about an hour ago."

John looked at him. "Just Marsham? Wasn't Rhea with him?"

Holt hedged. "Well, there was another rider there, come to think of it, but I was too far away to get a good look."

"Then it was Rhea. Marsham's come to take her to Two Bar for a couple of days to help entertain a niece of his from back East." He slapped the bedclothes irritably with the flat of his hand. "Damn this game leg of mine! Marsham's throwin' a big shindig tonight. I'd give a good horse and forty acres just to be there. Been a long time since I cut capers to fast fiddle music."

Holt said nothing.

John noticed the sober expression on his face. "Holt, you still don't trust Marsham, do you?"

"Not much farther'n I could throw this house," Holt said laconically.

Old John shook his head sadly. "You got to get over it, Holt. No use carryin' a grudge forever. Sure, times back we didn't get on too well with Clive Marsham. But, like I said once before, maybe that was partly our fault. Rhea<sup>3</sup> bein' here has made a difference. I've never known the range so quiet and peaceful. Why, you can just feel how peaceful it is now."

Holt admitted, silently and to himself, that he felt something all right. But it wasn't peace. "Maybe you're right, John," he said, but there was no conviction in his tone. He knew that the old man sensed this; he could feel his eyes on him as he left the room.

It was just after supper at sundown that Holt saddled and left, telling the bunkhouse crew that he had to check something on the Hereford graze and that he might not be back till morning. But when he was out of sight of the ranch buildings, he swung the blue roan in a more northerly direction, a direction that would take him well west of the Hereford graze.

It was full starlight long before he crossed into Two Bar territory, riding at an easy lope that ate up distance without tiring either horse or rider. He drew rein when he topped the ridge overlooking the valley where the headquarters of Marsham's huge outfit sprawled. The barnlot was ablaze with the light of paper lanterns strung overhead, and even at a distance the faint night breeze brought him the strains of fiddle and guitar and the sound of happy laughter. He gave a wry smile and rode on toward the lights.

Leaving the blue tethered in a willow grove beside the creek, he took off his spurs to avoid their jingle and went forward quietly on foot. He took no special pains to seek cover; it was the kind of a party where nobody would think much of a stray cowhand wandering about. He approached the barn from the far side to keep in the shadows. Once he reached the barn he peered between the cracks in the boards. Tables had been set up inside, loaded with quantities of food and drink. Out front in the barnlot a space had been cleared for dancing and couples swung

two and fro in time to a fast reel. Holt caught sight of Rhea for a brief instant as she swung out of the crowd of dancers, her face flushed with excitement and laughter, and he noticed how the eyes of the men standing around followed her. Then he saw Marsham swing past her, laughing, darkly handsome. He caught Rhea, whirled her in step to the music. She glanced up at him and their eyes held; then they spun away from the crowd and Holt lost them altogether as he moved to a new vantage point for a better look.

He turned quickly and walked along the back of the barn, feeling his way carefully in his unfamiliar surroundings. At the corner of the barn he noticed a jutting out-building attached to the barn. He was just about to enter it when a shaft of light falling between the cracks told him the place was already occupied. He stepped quietly back outside and listened.

The music had stopped, and above the chatter and hubbub he heard Rhea's voice. Her words were faint and indistinct and the noise of the crowd kept him from hearing what she said. Then he heard Marsham's voice, insistent, eager, as he said huskily, "I've waited all my life for this moment."

Holt found a crack and glued his eye to it. What he saw erased the last shred of doubt. They were locked together in a swaying embrace, their mouths pressed hungrily together. For a long time they stayed like that, moving slightly in the faint light. Holt's hand crept slowly toward his gun, his jaw set in harsh anger and he felt a trembling pass the length of his frame.

He turned away suddenly. There was no longer any reason to wait. John Fairbrother would have to know the worst sometime—he might as well face it now, before it was too late. Holt stepped swiftly along, feeling the side of the barn to guide his way. He was almost to the end when a figure detached itself from the deeper shadows and he felt the unmistakable prod of a Colt barrel in his mid-section.

"Lookin' for somebody, cowboy?" the strange voice asked quietly.

Holt froze in his tracks. He glanced at the man's face, but the dark shadows of the barn made recognition impossible. He didn't answer, knowing his voice might be a give-away.

The gun in his belly sank a little deeper. "Come on friend, let's walk around into the light and have a look at you, since you won't talk. Turn around and march back the way you just came."

Holt hesitated. The only light was where he had seen Rhea and Marsham. They might still be there. And when they saw him, trapped as he was, they would not only know instantly his reason for coming, but would probably guess what he had seen. He knew Marsham well enough to know what that would mean. It would be too bad about poor old Holt Shepway, riding right off the edge of that canyon in the dark like that.

The gun prodded again. "Move, dammit! You ain't paralyzed, but you're likely to be if you stand there much longer."

Holt turned as if to obey. His captor started to follow immediately, and then, in the fraction of a second that the gun moved aside, Holt brought his left arm up fast, knocking the Colt skyward and driving his right fist in a haymaking swing at the man's head. The blinding flash of the exploding Colt kept him from seeing where the blow landed, but he felt the sickening crunch of bone and flesh against his knuckles and heard the man thud solidly to the ground.

Still unable to see clearly from the gunflash, Holt ran stumbling around the rear of the barn just as he heard the running feet and excited shouts of the crowd pouring into the barn. He plunged among the sagebrush along the flat, glanced up quickly to mark his direction, then headed for the willow clump where the blue stood tethered. He figured it would take a few seconds for them to bring the man around. By then he could be a good distance away.

It must have taken longer than that, for when he glanced back from the ridge toward the lights on the flat below, he saw no signs of pursuit. As he listened he heard the fiddler take up the strains of a waltz. Still, he rode at a fast pace until he had put a good many miles between himself and Two Bar.

He had just pulled into a shallow arroyo to let the blue get its wind when he heard the clatter of hoofbeats pounding through the night. He tensed and turned in the saddle, eyes narrowing as they searched the darkness along his backtrail. An instant later he spun around. The rider

was not coming from behind, but from the general direction of Cross W. And he was coming fast.

Holt slipped down and put his hand over the blue's nostrils to cut off any telltale whinny. He could see the rider now as he streaked out across a flat below the arroyo. The brilliant starlight threw both horse and horseman into sharp relief against the lighter ground, and Holt recognized the man from the way he sat the running mount. It was Chuck.

The first thought that jolted through his mind was that the kid must have found out what was going on between Rhea and Marsham. In his unreasoning jealousy he would stop at nothing. Holt spun around and leapt into the saddle, jerking the roan down out of the arroyo and cutting across the flat to intercept. Chuck saw him coming, raised slightly in the saddle, then as recognition came he jerked his own mount to a skidding halt.

Holt grinned as Chuck gave him a surprised look.

Chuck came straight to the point. "Holt, I got bad news. John got up out of bed for some reason, got halfway into the front room before his game leg gave way. He hit his head a hell of a whack on the corner of a table. I'm riding to get Rhea. One of the boys has already lit out for town to get Doc Edwards."

"How bad is he, Chuck?" Holt said quickly.

"It's pretty bad," Chuck said soberly. "He's not dead, but he's pretty damn close." Then for the first time he seemed to realize where he had found his brother. He glanced around as if to reassure himself as to his surroundings. Then he turned to Holt and asked suspiciously, "Say, what the devil are you doing on Two Bar range at this time of night?"

Holt felt the accusation. "Couple of Herefords strayed through the fence. I just thought I'd have a look." Then he went on quickly, "You'd better get a move on, fella. I'll head on down and see how—"

"Holt, you're a damn liar!" Chuck said hotly. "Nobody in his right mind would go looking for a couple of strays at two in the morning."

Holt sat quietly, saying nothing. Chuck knew damn well he was right.

"It's Rhea," Chuck said, his voice beginning to tremble. "You didn't believe there was going to be a party tonight, did you, Holt? You had to ride halfway across Tomosa



County to satisfy that low-down suspicious mind of yours. Well, by God, if Old John dies I hope she throws you the hell off Cross W."

Chuck sat glaring at him, shaking visibly from the force of his anger. Through Holt's mind passed the thought that the kid, in his misguided loyalty, might let slip to Rhea that he had found Holt here. It wouldn't take much to connect that with the cowhand he had slugged behind the barn.

Holt shifted uncomfortably in his saddle and cleared his throat. "Kid," he said huskily, "if you'll just sit quiet for a minute I'll tell you something that might explain a few things."

"Go ahead," Chuck snapped. "But don't take all night. I got more important business to attend to."

"Maybe you'll change your mind before I'm through," Holt told him. "I found out a few things about Rhea when I was back in Kansas City."

"You couldn't pass up the chance to try and dig up some dirt, is that it?" Chuck sneered.

Holt ignored the remark and went on. "I met a man who knew her a long time before she married John. He knew her even before she was married to her first husband."

Chuck's expression changed slightly. "Her *first* husband?" he said warily.

Holt nodded. "She married a banker. Apparently she likes her husbands to have money. Only that time she got fooled. He was about to go bankrupt. She shot him so's she'd be free to marry somebody who really had money. That's where John came in." He stopped, watching the pained expression on Chuck's face, feeling a little sorry for the kid.

"How come she didn't get sent to prison?" Chuck said cautiously.

Holt shrugged. "You know how that goes. A pretty woman tells a male jury how she had to shoot this brute of a husband in self-defense. She's the kind of woman that can make a fool out of any man, one at a time or in bunches of twelve."

Holt paused, wondering just how far he should take it now that he'd started; wondering if he should tell Chuck about his suspicions concerning Rhea and Marsham, and how they had been verified by what he had just seen

in the barn. Before he could decide, Chuck had made a decision of his own.

"You're ready to believe any kind of gossip you hear about Rhea, aren't you? Well, listen, Holt, next time you run across some crummy low-minded friend of yours who's ready to say anything about an honest woman you just keep it to yourself. Because I don't want to hear a God damn thing about it!"

Before Holt could reply, Chuck had reined his mount angrily away and was streaking across the flat in the direction of Two Bar. Holt watched him till he was out of sight, then as the sound of hoofbeats faded into silence he shook his head soberly and turned the roan homeward. He knew, from the way Chuck had left it, that nothing would be said to Rhea about what had passed between the two brothers. But Holt wondered if it would make much difference now.

Doc Edwards' sleek chestnut mare perked up her ears and whinnied as Holt thundered up to the yard gate an hour later and dismounted. He slid off the blue, draped his reins hastily over the hitchrail and pushed open the gate. As he ran up the path toward the porch he could see shadows moving quietly against the net curtains in the glow of lamplight. Maria opened the door for him and he took off his hat and stepped inside.

"How is he, Maria?" Holt asked quietly.

The housekeeper looked up at him with tearstained eyes and her breath came out in a sob. "*Muy malo!*" she said, then she turned and walked swiftly toward the kitchen, dabbing at her face with a handkerchief. Holt shook his head and started down the hall, pausing to glance into the living room. He noticed the overturned table and the bloodstained Navajo rug and moved on with a sigh. The door to the bedroom was open slightly and he looked in. Doc Edwards glanced up and Holt motioned quietly to ask if he could come in. The doctor nodded, putting a cautious finger to his lips for silence.

Holt stepped into the room and stopped when he caught sight of the white, silent figure there on the bed. An enormous white bandage gave the old man's head a strange appearance. Beneath it the wrinkled old face seemed frail and lifeless; the hands lying motionless on the blanket seemed suddenly to have lost their gnarled

strength. Now they were skeletal, gaunt. Holt felt a strange sense of loneliness beginning to gnaw inside him, and for the first time he came face to face with the realization that a life which had seemed to him incapable of destruction was fast nearing its end.

Doc Edwards straightened up and walked around the bed, glancing back at the old man's silent figure.

"How is he, Doc?" Holt asked quietly.

Doc Edwards chewed his lip reflectively for a minute, staring at the floor. Then he glanced up at Holt. "If he was a younger man, maybe I'd be able to say something hopeful. But John's pretty near seventy, isn't he?"

"Sixty-eight," Holt said quickly, almost hopefully. Then he realized that two years meant little now.

"Well, when a man gets to be that age. . . ."

"You mean it's as bad as that, Doc?"

"I don't see any point in getting your hopes up, son," the doctor said kindly. "You've been together a long time. But life's not a permanent thing with any of us. Fact is, John has lived through more than most men could in ten lifetimes."

Holt turned again to look at the pale figure on the bed. But instead of Old John, he saw a woman's face come between them, hazily, blocking his view. And her eyes were smiling.

"I'd say he had a fifty-fifty chance, Holt," the doctor was saying. "The longer he holds out, the better his chances are. I've done all I can. Keep him quiet. Don't let him get excited. He's got a lot of pressure on the brain from that blow on the head. Maybe he's got a blood clot someplace—they usually do in a case like this. It's important to keep him quiet. Any excitement might send that clot moving toward his heart."

Holt nodded quietly. The doctor picked up his hat and bag. "You're welcome to spend the night," Holt said. "It's a long way back to town."

"Thanks, but I've got a woman about due to foal twins, if I'm a good guesser. I've got to be on hand." He smiled quietly. "That's the way it goes in this business—bring some of 'em in, try to keep others around a little longer."

Holt listened as the sound of the mare's hoofs died out in the night. Then he sat down in a chair. For a long time he sat, watching and thinking. Then weariness crept over him and he slept.

How long he slept he had no way of knowing, but he was awakened by the rapid sound of hoofbeats gradually growing louder. He got up and crossed to the window, glancing first at the figure on the bed, noticing gratefully that the old man still breathed. Drawing aside the curtain he looked out in time to see Chuck assisting Rhea as she dismounted in a billow of skirts. Apparently she had left without waiting to change into riding clothes. Holt wondered bitterly if her haste had been prompted by some small particle of human compassion, or whether she had hurried back to find whether she might be the new owner of Cross W. He let the curtain fall back and waited by the door for her to come in.

She came quickly through the door, then stopped when she saw him. Her eyes flashed to the bed, then back to Holt. "How is he?" she whispered.

Holt repeated, in detail, what the doctor had told him, laying pointed emphasis on the necessity for avoiding excitement. Then he turned and left the room. When he looked back she was standing where he had left her, unmoving, staring at the figure on the bed.

Chuck looked up when Holt came into the living room. His first glance was one of interest in Old John's condition. Holt told him that the old man still lived. Neither spoke after that. Holt rolled a cigarette, sank heavily into a cowhide chair and stared at the floor as he smoked. Chuck sat across from him, sitting on the edge of his seat, watching Holt's face with a look of grim defiance. To Holt it was obvious that the kid was itching for an opportunity to take up the argument over Rhea where they had left off. He continued to smoke in silence, ignoring his brother's presence in the room, his mind busy with what he wanted to say to Rhea when she came out.

After a few minutes he heard the door to John's bedroom close quietly and Rhea's footsteps approached the living room. She paused in the doorway, glancing from one brother to the other. Holt noticed she was dry-eyed.

He stood up and flipped his cigarette into the fireplace and turned to Chuck. "I'd like a chance to talk with Mrs. Fairbrother," he said pointedly.

Chuck glared up at him but made no effort to move. "Go ahead, Holt, it's all in the family."

"All right, then," Holt said evenly, "I'll put it another way. What I've got to say is none of your concern."

The younger Shepway came slowly to his feet, his face flushed. "You picked a fine time to try and stir up trouble. Well, if you think I'm going to walk out and let you 'ake advantage of her, maybe try to talk her into something when's she's all upset over—"

"Chuck!"

Rhea's voice was low, but there was a sharpness in it that took Chuck by surprise. He turned to look at her.

She spoke to him again, her voice softer this time, and smiling a little. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Chuck. If Holt has something he wishes to discuss in private, then I think it might be best if you left us alone for awhile."

Chuck picked up his hat and stalked out of the room. Holt waited until the sound of his footsteps had died away in the direction of the bunkhouse, then he turned to Rhea. "You have pretty good luck getting rid of your husbands, don't you, Mrs. Fairbrother?"

She staggered, as though he had struck her. He went on: "First Conway, now John. I wonder if you've already figured out how you'll get rid of Clive Marsham, too?"

She clutched the doorway for support and her face drained of its color. Then she recovered and said quietly, "So that's it. I see you've been prying into my past. Does that give you great satisfaction?"

"It didn't take much prying, Mrs. Fairbrother," Holt said levelly. "It's pretty common talk around Kansas City. It came to me; I didn't go looking for it."

Rhea drew a deep breath, her breasts straining proudly against the confining material of her dress. Her eyes snapped fire as she spoke again. "You've given it it's right name, Holt. Common talk. Maybe malicious gossip would be better. But since you've found out, perhaps you'd care to listen to my explanation."

"I don't care much for that kind of explaining, Mrs. Fairbrother," Holt cut in. "I've got eyes and ears of my own. I suppose you can even find a good explanation for the way you were acting with Clive Marsham tonight out behind the barn."

This time her face flushed in embarrassment and she opened her mouth as if to speak, but Holt interrupted her with a wave of his hand. "Just let me have my say. You've married a man old enough to be your grandfa'her—a pretty rich old man. That pretty well fixes the kind of

a woman you are. Well, it looks like you're close to getting what you want; but I just want to tell you one thing." He stepped up to her and grasped her by the shoulders, his voice hoarse with pent-up anger. "If John Fairbrother dies and you go ahead and marry Clive Marsham then, so help me God, I'll not rest till I see the two of you in hell together where you belong!" He released her suddenly, brushing her aside as he strode through the hall toward the front door.

## Chapter Ten

HOLT!"

Her voice had a pleading note in it that made him hesitate. He stood there for a long minute, his hand on the handle of the half-opened door, letting the chill wind of the December night blow over him. He felt a strange exhilaration as he drew it deep into his lungs; or was it more the knowledge that there had been a note of pleading in her voice? Was it the sign that the power she had held over him was at last beginning to weaken?

He turned his head slowly and looked at her. She was still standing where he had left her, in the doorway. But her head was bowed, her face buried in her hands, and the silent sobs that shook her were those of any woman reduced to tears. He closed the door quietly and went back, and this time he was troubled to find that even in his triumph, even when he had justifiable reason to hate her, he still felt the urge to take her in his arms. And he knew then that the danger was not yet past; that she still had the power to bend him to her will if he lost his grip on himself.

She lifted her face as he came up and stood looking at her. Then she smiled a sad little smile. "Holt," she whispered, biting her lip to hold back further tears, "please don't leave me like this. Not now—for John's sake please don't." She turned and went into the room. He hesitated for an instant, then followed, reluctantly.

She sank into a chair and indicated that he should do the same. But he shook his head. She didn't press him. Folding her hands on her lap she stared into the fire and began to talk, quietly, but confidently. Too confidently, Holt thought. Like she might have planned what to say a long time ago, in case this situation ever arose.

"It's not easy to leave your past behind, is it? But since you know, it's only fair that you should listen to the truth. I know what they're saying about me in Kansas City. They're saying that I married Clarence Conway for his money. I won't deny that that was partly the reason.

But I also loved him. At least, I thought I did. Until I found that he didn't really love me. I was like a new play-thing to him, something he had bought with his money."

She paused and glanced up at Holt. His face was expressionless, waiting for her to go on. She sighed and turned back to the fire.

"After about a year he tired of me. I guess he would have divorced me, except that he had no cause and because it might have hurt his social standing. I knew when he first started being unfaithful to me. Like every other wife faced with the same situation, I guess I tried to pretend it didn't exist. But it isn't much of a marriage when only one of the partners remains faithful. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. I insisted on a divorce on the grounds of his adultery. He refused. He knew I had the necessary proof, and he knew it would ruin him if it became known. When I wouldn't change my mind he—" she paused and covered her face with her hands,—"he tried to kill me." She took her hands away and looked up at Holt. "I shot him," she finished quietly, "in self-defense."

Holt said nothing and began rolling a cigarette.

"You still don't believe me, do you?" she asked.

"That's your story," Holt said evenly. "I've heard another side."

She looked away. "I know. They tried to prove on the witness stand that I'd discovered he was nearly bankrupt and had killed him in order to be free to marry someone else." She looked back at Holt. "Someone who had money. Because, you see, I was honest enough to admit I hated being poor, that I *had* taken his wealth into consideration when I married him. And because I was honest about that they condemned me for it. Not in court. The jury set me free. But there's no justice in gossip. I guess that as long as I live I'll find my name is still being dragged through the filth."

When Holt said nothing she sighed again and went on, "I know what you're thinking. You mentioned what happened tonight with Clive Marsham. I know you're ready to believe the worst about that, too."

"You usually don't find smoke without fire," Holt said easily. "And from where I stood there was plenty of smoke."

For a minute she stared at him, biting her lip—to hold



back tears or an angry retort, he couldn't be sure which. "You can be terribly cruel when you want to, Holt."

"I wouldn't exactly say you were being kind to poor old John in there," he said bitterly.

"That's extremely unfair, Holt. What happened tonight with Clive was—well, he'd had a few too many drinks. The dancing, the music—he just got a bit too amorous, that's all."

"I didn't see you put up much resistance."

She gave a little smile. "Your code in this western country is so rigid, isn't it? All black and white. A man tries to kiss a girl and it becomes a case for blazing guns.

"The trouble with you, Holt, is that you've been brought up with cows and horses and have a narrow outlook on life. You see me as an intruder; someone from a world you've never known. In your opinion, everything I do can only be wrong. You can't understand that my friendship with Clive Marsham is purely one of diplomacy, to keep the peace. You seem determined to prove me wrong, even if it means actually stirring up the range war we so desperately need to avoid. Can't you see how much it has meant to John? Can't you realize how important it is that his remaining years be made as happy and peaceful as possible? I don't think you really do, Holt, or else you wouldn't have gone out of your way tonight to trail me all the way to Two Bar just to satisfy your suspicions."

Holt finished his cigarette and threw it in the fire. "Maybe they do things differently back in Kansas City, Mrs. Fairbrother. But out here when a woman marries a man she doesn't go around carrying on an affair with a neighboring rancher when her husband's in bed with a broken leg."

Rhea sighed and gazed at her hands on her lap as though trying to find there the answer to her dilemma. "There is no accounting for the behavior of the human heart, Holt," she said quietly. "I love John—not in the way I could love a younger man, perhaps, but I love him just the same and I'll be true to him. Part of being true to him is fitting in with the life and the people who surround him. That is why I wanted to be friends with you and Chuck and with Clive Marsham. You're the only one who's been difficult. When you rode off that first night I felt there was something wrong. I thought you might have disliked me because . . ."

She stopped and turned her head. There had been a sound. Holt had heard it too. It came again, from the direction of the bedroom. Holt was out of the room first, Rhea following at his heels.

When he came into the room he found Old John struggling to raise himself on one elbow and tried to quiet him. Easing the elderly cowman back on his pillow, Holt said gently, "Take it easy, John. Everything's going to be all right. We just went out for a minute so's you could get a little sleep. How do you feel?"

John looked up at him and shook his head feebly. "Not so good, son," he said hoarsely. "I must've hit my head awful hard when I took that header in the front room."

Holt forced a grin he did not feel. "Shucks, I've seen the day you could butt a steer off his feet with that head of yours, John. A little crack on the head won't keep you down for long. You'll be up and around as ornery as ever in a week or two."

The old man shook his head again in denial. "I ain't as young as I used to be, Holt. A man starts to fade pretty fast when he gets close to seventy and has lived as hard as I have. I'm findin' that out now."

Holt started to answer but Old John turned his head and asked, "Where's Rhea? I want the two of you to come in here. I want to stay something before it's too late."

Holt looked up. Rhea was standing across the bed. John hadn't seen her. She leaned over close and whispered softly, "I'm here, John. Now you just go on back to sleep. Never mind about us, just get some rest."

"No, I want to get this settled. Holt, I guess you know it's only natural for a man to leave his property to his wife. I don't want to make you think I'm throwin' away everythin' we've built up over the years. Nothin' of the sort. It'll still be here. Rhea'll need it to keep her after I'm gone. And I want you to stick around and take care of her."

Holt avoided Rhea's gaze with an effort. He nodded to let John know he understood, but his eyes were misty with sadness and anger as he debated inwardly whether it would be cruelty or kindness to tell him now how things stood. He decided it would not be kindness. The old war-horse deserved what peace he could find in his last hours. It would be up to Holt to sort things out into their proper place after John was gone.

"Rhea," the old man went on, "I got it all made out in a will that you're to get the ranch. Only there's one provision. That's that you keep Holt on as foreman as long as he wants to stay, and that you give both him and Chuck a job as long as you own the place. 'Course if you have to sell out, both of these boys are good enough never to have to worry about findin' a job." He closed his eyes and settled back. "Now go on out of here, both of you," he said with a feeble smile. "I want to get some sleep."

Holt stood up, but he did not leave immediately. He stood there watching, until the steady breathing reassured him that it was really sleep that had come. Then he glanced up at Rhea. She was smiling at him. And in the smile he saw once again what he had known all along; that she had never lost her power for an instant. And he realized something else. John had said she was to keep him on as foreman as long as she owned Cross W. That was in the will. But there was a simple way around that for her. All she had to do was marry Clive Marsham and transfer ownership to him. He saw in the smile that she would have her revenge.

Winter hit the Panhandle hard just after Christmas that year. Old John lingered on, halfway between life and death, unaware of the raging blizzards and ice storms that swept down out of the northwest and piled the drifts high, then covered them with a solid sheet of ice. Holt found enough to keep him busy breaking ice so cattle could get to water, and the whole Cross W crew struggled with him determinedly as they dragged cattle out of canyons where they had slid on the ice, or pulled them out of neck-deep drift and drove them, floundering, into sheltered valleys. Though it was the worst winter any of them could remember, they lost not a single head. This happy circumstance was not due to luck, and certainly not due to the weather. It was due to the fact that Holt drove himself and the crew unmercifully.

The spring thaws came early, as sometimes happens when winter has been overly severe. And by the time the first tender shoots of new grass began to tinge the rolling hills with green, Old John was to be seen making his way as far as the front steps of the veranda with the aid of a cane. He seemed much thinner, much older, but he was still alive and the bright sunshine and the promise of a

good Hereford calf crop seemed to send the sap flowing through him once again.

Spring brought something else that winter with its ice and snow, had kept away. Clive Marsham. He seemed to be impressed with the way the Herefords had survived the winter, and was even more impressed with the estimates Old John made concerning the calf crop and the spring market.

The spring roundup that year saw the end of the longhorn era on Cross W range. At the end of April Holt boarded a train for Kansas City with two thousand head of longhorns, and orders from John to buy an equal number of Herefords if he could find that many.

There were two things about the situation that gave Holt Shepway pause to think. Barbed wire was being strung clear around Cross W and there were dark glances as the wagons rolled out of Clear Creek piled high with reels to do the job. The other thing was water. No rain had fallen in the Panhandle since mid-March. Barbed wire around the whole of Cross W would keep not only Marsham but a lot of little ranchers from the pools on the Canadian if the drought continued.

There was an uneasy feel to the dry Panhandle wind sweeping through the window as the train bore Holt eastward toward Kansas City.

## Chapter Eleven

WITH THE HELP of Cal Bonner, Holt combed every market within a hundred and fifty miles of Kansas City. It was mid-June when he finally headed southwest once again. He had the two thousand Herefords he had been sent to buy, but looking out of the window of the train as it rolled into western Oklahoma, he wondered if the cattle might not be destined for disaster. Red earth lay scorched and cracked under the blistering sun and drifting dust filtered into the train even with windows closed against it. Tumbleweeds raced endlessly across the barren, parched panorama, driven before a nagging dry wind that had been born in the desert country below the Rio Grande. Now and then he caught sight of cattle, gaunt, hollow-eyed, shuffling aimlessly across hard-baked flats where lakes had once stood. And as they moved further westward he began to see the gleaming white lattice-pattern of ribs glistening in the sun.

When he descended from the train at Clear Creek it seemed that dust lay everywhere, deep, dry and hot. From the depot he could hear the clanging flap of shutters slapping against the peeling boards along the single street. He looked around for the Cross W crew and saw them stirring themselves from the shelter of the blacksmith shop and leading their mounts across the road to the railroad corrals.

"How bad's it been, Chuck?" he asked as he shook hands with his brother.

Chuck shook his head and squinted out across the plains where the brown, dead grass lay choked in dust. "Worst I've ever seen, Holt." Then he looked back at Holt and added, "But the drought is just half of it."

Holt felt a tight knot grow in the pit of his stomach. He glanced around at the other Cross W riders. They were watching Chuck with faces tense and drawn, waiting for him to finish. Holt shifted his gaze back to his brother. "What's the other half?"

"Well, to start with, our wire is being pulled down as fast as we can get it up. Seems there are some folks around

here have got the idea that wire might keep their stock from getting through to water."

"Marsham?" Holt gritted the name between his teeth.

Chuck looked away and shrugged. Then he passed over the question, leaving it unanswered. "Some longhorn stock has drifted in and mixed with the Herefords. We've tried to keep 'em culled out, but there's a new leak in the fence every night and they keep coming in."

"How's John taking all this?" Holt asked earnestly.

Chuck shook his head. "He's not. We haven't told him."

Holt sensed the ominous meaning behind his brother's words. "You mean he's got worse? So bad you can't even tell him what's going on?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Then why the hell do you let fence-busters get through every night? Do you think that's going to make him any happier when he does find out?"

Holt expected the kid to flare up, or to give some kind of a ready answer. Instead Chuck shrugged. "I'm not the foreman. I just draw rider's pay, same as the rest of the boys."

"Then who the devil . . .?" Holt stopped. Rhea. This was her idea of keeping the range peaceful. Letting every two-bit rancher and shanty cowman make a game out of ripping down Cross W fence.

Holt turned to look at the corrals where the Herefords were coming bawling out of the cars in a cloud of dust. "All right," he said tersely, "you boys stick around and haze these critters home when you check the tally. Chuck, is my roan anywhere around?"

Chuck nodded. "In Hobart's blacksmith shop. He threw a shoe on the way to town." Then he added cautiously, "You going someplace?"

"I want to see John."

"He's not fit to stand up to bad news, Holt. I'd be careful."

"I know that," Holt said shortly. "I just want to see him." He turned away and crossed the road toward Hobart's, conscious of Chuck's lingering gaze following him. Chuck knew who it was Holt wanted to see. And it wasn't Old John. Not right away, anyhow.

Rhea was waiting on the veranda when he dismounted at the gate. She rose and came to meet him as he walked

up the path. Without bothering to say hello he asked, "How is John? Can I see him?"

"Yes, you may go in. But, be careful what you say. He doesn't know about the drought. He's very weak, Holt."

Holt brushed past her, and entered John's room. Old John lay staring quietly ahead, as white as the mountain of pillows supporting him. Holt forced a grin and said casually, "Evening, John. Well, it took a little time, but I finally got them. It's good to be back after—"

The old man's eyes rested vacantly on Holt's face. "Got them?" he murmured. "Got what, Holt? You been someplace?"

"The Herefords. The two thousand head. I . . ." He stopped and a feeling of despair crept over him as he realized how far gone the old cowman really was. John had turned his gaze out the window and was murmuring slowly, "Nearly sundown, ain't it? Boys'll be comin' in pretty soon." He turned his head again to look at Holt, smiling faintly. "Fancy suit you're wearin', son. Dance somewhere tonight?"

Holt swallowed hard. "Why—why, yeah, John. I just thought I'd drop in and ask if it was all right if I went into town. Yeah, there's a dance, John."

Old John closed his eyes wearily and smiled. "Sure, son. Go right ahead. Might come in later myself." Holt stayed until the old man fell asleep. Turning quietly he tiptoed out of the room, a heavy feeling deep inside him.

Rhea met him on the porch. She faced him as he came out. "How long has he been like that?" Holt said grimly.

"Since just after you left. He's stronger now than he was."

Holt dropped his hands to his side and sighed deeply as he stared out across the seared hills lying hot and brown in the slanting rays of the evening sun.

"Holt." Her voice was soft and quiet. "We've tried keeping up the fence while you've been gone, but it's no good. The other ranchers—their cattle are dying for want of water. I want you to forget that there was ever anything unpleasant between us. I want you to listen to me for the sake of Cross W. I've asked the others, but they were afraid to take the responsibility unless you were here to approve."

"You want me to breach the fence, is that it?"

She nodded.

He stared at her for a full minute, then smiled dryly. "So that your friend Marsham can get his cattle onto our land, huh?"

"No, Holt, I'm talking about the little ranchers. Sure, Clive has been here. He came because he was concerned about the feeling over the fence. Some of the little ranchers came to him and—"

"Listen to me, Mrs. Fairbrother," Holt said sharply. "If any of the little ranchers wanted water badly enough, they'd come here; they wouldn't go running to Clive Marsham. For that matter, all the little ranchers in Tomosa County are within reach of the Canadian. All they have to do is drive along the fence till they come to water. Your friend Marsham has just built up this business about the fence to stir up trouble. He knows John is in no shape to face up to a ruckus. Any trouble right now would send him to his grave."

Rhea looked up at him defiantly, her eyes flashing. "Have you seen the Canadian since you got back?" When Holt didn't answer she smiled bitterly. "I thought not. Then you ought to go take a look at it. It has disappeared, Holt. You can walk across it in most places and not get your boots muddy. The only pools remaining lie inside Cross W territory. Maybe you ought to ride down and look at it. Then perhaps you'll see what I mean about the fence."

"Then that's all the more reason why the fence stays up," Holt snapped. "I've just brought two thousand head of Herefords onto this range. If the situation is as bad as you say it is, then we'll need every drop of water to keep our own stock alive."

He turned and went down the steps and across the yard with angry strides. He would hold Cross W together with barbed wire and with lead bullets, if need be against all comers, as long as he was foreman— As long as John Fairbrother lived. . . .

When he had changed to range clothes Holt offsaddled the blue and switched his rig to a linebacked buckskin from his string and rode south for the Canadian. He reached the line of gypsum hills overlooking the bottomlands just at moonrise. Reining in, he glanced long and carefully along the river for miles in both directions. As far as he could see, only three or four pools stood out along the



entire stretch of riverbed. Around these he saw vague shapes of the whitefaced Herefords, bedded down within reach of the precious water. Other than that the once-wide Canadian was a winding ribbon of sand, shining in the brilliant moonlight, bordered with withered marsh grass and cottonwoods. If the drought held much longer, another three weeks perhaps, Cross W itself would know the raucous cry of buzzards and the stench of rotting beef.

He was about to turn away when he caught sight of a flurry of movement some three or four miles away among the hills bordering the river. Moving shapes packed closely together, riders flanking them as the water-crazed cattle swept down a dry arroyo toward the flatlands and the wet smell of the stagnant pools. Somebody had breached the fence and was driving a herd of some three hundred head toward Cross W water. Holt swore aloud and skidded down the slope to intercept the night riders.

They were following close along the eastern fence, making for the first water hole just inside Cross W territory. Long before Holt reached them the leaders had already plunged into the water and were snuffling and snorting greedily as they drank their fill. The riders had all dismounted some distance away, except a handful who kept riding among the steers to keep them from drinking themselves to death. Holt saw the glow of matches as the men lit smokes, saw them look up at the sound of his approach. One of them stood up as he rode closer and he recognized the bulky figure of Ed Studdal.

Holt drew rein as he came alongside. He sat quietly, looking from one man to the next. A few of them he recognized. For the most part they were shiftless squatters who made a half-hearted attempt at running cattle, but mainly by running their iron on anything that came their way. Five of them were Studdal and his crew. These, he thought bitterly, were the little ranchers Rhea had pleaded for. Just the kind of an outfit he thought Marsham would be capable of getting to do his dirty work.

"Evenin', Shepway," Studdal said brazenly. "Nice night, ain't it?"

There was an uneasy snicker from some of the dirty-shirt cowmen who had looked away shifty-eyed from Holt's gaze. But at the confident sound of Studdal's booming voice they straightened their shoulders and grinned cockily up at the Cross W foreman.

"It was a nice night," Holt said pointedly, "until you came along."

Studdal flipped his cigarette away and swaggered a few steps toward Holt's buckskin. Remembering what the gunman had tried before, Holt kept his gun side toward the man, shifting the buckskin to get clear range.

"Aw, I wouldn't get shirty, Shepway," Studdal said over-amiably. "We just run in a few cows that need a drink, that's all. You got water, we ain't. You ain't goin' to keep your friends away from water with bob wire at a time like this, are you?"

"I'm not going to chew words with you, Studdal. I've got two thousand head of whitefaces coming on this range tonight. That's not counting what's already here. You know how much water Cross W's got. You could see it from the hills as you busted through the fence. It's not enough to see us through more'n three more weeks. I don't like to be hard about this. I know water's short. But there's bound to be other pools down the river. Go ahead and water your herd. Then get 'em out of here and keep 'em out. And put that fence back up when you go through."

Studdal stuck his tongue in his cheek and turned to glance back at his followers. "Ain't that always the way, though. Them that's got won't give you a drop if you was dyin'."

There was a murmur of angry assent from the men crowding around. Holt was aware that they had closed in around the buckskin on all sides now. One man reached up and laid his hand on the buckskin's bridle.

"Take your hand off that bridle, mister!" Holt said sharply.

The man grinned, glancing at Studdal for reassurance. "I ain't hurtin' nothin', Shepway. Or do you think the likes of us ain't even good enough to touch your horse?"

"The last time you touched a Cross W mount, Manning, it stuck to your fingers. Or did you forget about that?"

"Hell, I only borrowed it because I got drunk and couldn't find my own," the man grinned.

"Then maybe if you'd stay sober long enough to tend to your own business you wouldn't have to go stealing other people's water," Holt said. He glanced around him.

"There's not a damn one of you here that can call yourselves a cowman. It's only by running your iron on some-

body else's beef that you keep in beans and liquor. How much is Marsham paying you to put on this show?"

The remark, Holt judged, hit home. Though these men were superior in numbers, they still had an ingrained respect for the Cross W foreman and the type of rancher he represented. They might be envious of John Fairbrother's wealth, but not a man among them could find anything but admiration for the way the old man had built it up from nothing where they had failed. Several of the men exchanged quick glances, then looked at Studdal. The hefty gunman saw things were beginning to go wrong.

Studdal thrust his thumbs through his gunbelt and looked sharply at the men around him. "Seems to me, fellers, that the situation is plain enough. Shepway's done told us to get out and stay out. Cross W's got water, but they don't mean to let you poor fellers have it, even if you lose every head of stock you got. What it'd take to let your beef water here wouldn't be a drop in the bucket to Cross W, but did you ever see a big rancher willin' to give the little feller a break? Hell no. You don't mean nothin' to Cross W."

There was a loud chorus of angry voices. The noise spooked the buckskin and he shied sideways. "Look at 'im now," Studdal roared, "tryin' to run down honest men just because they need a little water for their cattle! Hell, how much proof do you need? Didn't you see him try to ride over you? Think he gives a damn if he breaks every bone in your body?"

Holt felt them pressing in around him. Somebody reached up to pluck at his Colt and he slapped the man's arm away with an angry motion. The buckskin snorted and cow-kicked in protest. The hoof caught one of the men sharply on the knee, dislocating the kneecap, and he rolled over in the sand, howling in agony.

"See there!" Studdal bellowed. "Don't let him get away with that! Drag him off that horse!"

Holt saw the angry faces bobbing around him on all sides now, shouting, clawing, raised to lynch-fever pitch by Studdal's goading. He smelled the pungent whisky breath of a man tugging his foot from the stirrup, knew the danger that lay in the fury of the mob. His hand streaked for his holster and met emptiness. Somebody gave a cackling laugh and he looked down to see a man twirling the Colt in his hand.

"He likes bob wire," somebody yelled, "let's give him a taste of it and see how he likes it then!"

Holt clapped his spurs to the buckskin, but the horse was held head-down by the bridle and could only struggle feebly against the press of men around him. Somebody grabbed Holt's arm and there was a ripping tear as he jerked free. The man lunged again and Holt swung his fist hard, catching the man a solid blow on the jaw that cracked like a rifle shot and sent him sprawling.

Then he felt himself jerked from the saddle by a dozen angry hands and thrown roughly to the ground. Somebody kicked him in the mouth and he tasted the warm rush of salty blood and felt the gritting between his teeth as they shoved his head in the sand, laughing.

"Drag him over here!" came Studdal's voice. "Here's a good solid Cross W fence post that ought to hold him. Somebody cut a few lengths of that bob wire. Hell, it'll beat any bullwhip you ever saw. Cut it about two foot long so's you can handle it."

Holt struggled desperately, but it was useless. They swarmed over him, overpowering him and lifting him clear of the ground. He felt himself being carried along for a distance, then he was suddenly slammed down on hard ground and jerked into a sitting position. Somebody threw a rope around his arms and they pulled him up, turning him around and shoving him hard against a fence post. It was a high post, one that had been planted when the water ran at normal level, high enough to keep the bottom wire clear of drift. The rope was passed quickly around his neck, drawing his head against the post with a sharp crack that made lights flash in his brain. They tied his feet and passed the rope up to his hands and drew it down tight. In this position he was neither sitting nor standing; just sagging against the post in discomfort.

"Take off his shirt!" a voice yelled. "I want to see how this wire works."

They ripped off his shirt and undershirt and he felt the cool night breeze blowing across his bare back. He breathed hard, straining against the ropes, but the exertion only drew the knots tighter about his wrists and ankles and clogged his mouth with a bloody froth.

"Who's first?" Studdal asked. Holt saw the man come up beside him. He was swinging several two-foot strands of barbed wire splayed at one end like a whisk, the other

end held together with a knotted piece of rope that let it swing freely like a cat-o'-nine-tails. Studdal let it drag gently across his bare back and Holt gritted his teeth as the sharp barbs dug in, tearing the skin.

Studdal laughed. "Lookit that, will you! He's ticklish!"

A roar of laughter greeted this as the blood-crazed crowd of men pressed closer. "Go on, Ed. You go first."

Studdal grinned. "All right. I'm goin' to enjoy this." He set his feet wide, gave a couple of tentative swings that made a whistling sound, gauging his distance. Then Holt saw the stocky legs tense, heard the whine of the wire as it came down. He braced himself for the shock, gritting his teeth. Streaks of fire seared his back and his muscles convulsed involuntarily as the barbs tore through nerve and sinew. Hot blood rushed down his back and ran warm and sticky under the waistband of his levis.

"Next!" Studdal roared.

Footsteps shuffled in the sand and another man took his place. This time there was no shouting as the men looked on. Somehow the sight of the bloody streaks standing like black gashes in the moonlight had had a sobering effect. The second man swung down hard. It was Manning.

Holt stiffened against his bonds and groaned aloud as the wires bit deep, the barbs carrying away bits of skin and flesh impaled on their tips. This time there was no laughter. Holt watched the next man's legs approaching, braced himself once more. The wires whistled. It seemed to Holt as though the strands had cut through clear to his chest. Pain paralyzed his lungs. Then blessed oblivion closed down.

## Chapter Twelve

THE MOON WAS DOWN long before Holt regained consciousness. He was brought awake, slowly, groggily, by the bone-piercing chill that pervades the high plateau of the Panhandle in the hours just prior to dawn. It took some time for him to remember what had happened; then the throbbing, torn mass that had been his back brought memory into sharp focus.

He groaned aloud with the pain, then struggled with his bonds. His movements were feeble at first, slowed by the numbness where the ropes cut off circulation. Gradually the life flowed painfully back to his fingers and he could move them more freely. But the activity only increased his suffering. So much that he was forced to stop at short intervals to let the throbbing subside, digging his teeth into the rough bark of the cedar post to maintain sanity.

They had tied him well, and his efforts to free himself were hampered by the weight of his own body pulling against the ropes that held his wrists. His awkward position made it almost impossible to relieve the strain on the ropes without constant exertion, and each time he fell back, wearied by exhaustion, he lost the progress he had made.

A faint grey line above the eastern hills warned him of the approach of daylight. He knew full well that the coming of the sun with its blistering heat and attendant thirst would only increase his difficulties. He knew, too, that the possibility of his being found that day was slight. Chuck and his group of riders would be busy moving the new Herefords onto Cross W range, and they might not find him missing until they returned to the main ranch sometime that afternoon. By the time they missed him and started a search it might be sundown again. He raised his head wearily and gazed at the rapidly spreading band of light in the east. There was no need to guess what a whole day could mean to a man bound and helpless and naked to the waist beneath the merciless heat of the Texas sun. Ironically, he recalled the last drink of water he had

had aboard the train just before it pulled into Clear Creek. He remembered, vividly, removing the lid from the five-gallon crock in the caboose, drinking a little, then tossing the remainder of the dipperful through the open window. He groaned again and pulled himself to his knees. The orange rim of the sun was already showing above the rim of hills.

They had tied him with a length of lass rope taken from somebody's saddle. Tough maguey, built to stand the sudden shock of a thousand pounds of steer, or the smoking friction as some cantankerous bronc took up slack around a snubbing post.

He set to work with the only instruments at his disposal. His mouth was ragged and bloody from the kick in the face, and his teeth felt loose in their sockets as he dug them into the unyielding fiber. But it was his only chance. . . .

It was almost noon when the rope snapped. Holt sat back on the hot sand and stared in dazed fashion at the frayed and bloodied ends of maguey between his wrists. The pain of his lacerated back and mouth were forgotten now in his all-consuming thirst. He raised his bloodshot eyes and tried to focus them on the distant pool of water. It seemed to recede before his vision.

With a low cry of dismay he rose to his feet, forgetting they were still bound. The first attempt to step off sent him sprawling face down in the blistering heat of the sand. He dragged himself slowly into a sitting position and fumbled with the ropes until they fell away. Then he stood up again and started off, staggering like a drunken man and cursing his inability to pursue a steady course.

After some fifteen or twenty minutes he felt his legs go rubbery and he pitched headlong into the sand again. This time it took longer for him to rise to a sitting position. He looked about him, his head wobbling uncertainly now as he tried to get his bearings. Then he saw his own tracks in the sand; saw the zig-zag course he had falteringly followed. The post, a fragment of bloodstained rope hanging from it, was less than a hundred yards away. He began to laugh; a croaking, parched laugh that tortured his swollen throat. He stopped suddenly and began struggling to his feet, cursing irrationally under his breath.

Another ten yards and he fell again. This time he couldn't rise beyond his hands and knees. He began crawl-

ing, like some kind of mangled lizard, breathing heavily as the fierce heat of the sun beat down on his lacerated back. His blurred vision made it impossible to keep a sense of direction. He kept on by sheer force of his own madness. His mind refused to function, his brain seemed to have melted inside his head.

Vague, fleeting impressions floated past him in the shimmering haze; he seemed to remember a woman's face, smiling—Rhea's. Then he saw Studdal—heavy, ugly, grinning. But they faded almost as quickly as they appeared, and were replaced by a hazy impression of cool, clear pools surrounded by lush green that seemed to beckon from close by. He raised his head. The impression faded as he reached out to clutch at a hump of green grass and felt it turn to hot sand in his grasp.

A dark shadow flitted past him on the sand and he glanced up. Even in his addled state he recognized the significance of the big bird wheeling high above him. With a groan he dug his elbows deep into the sand, shoving with his feet behind him and drew himself slowly, painfully forward. He saw the mirage again. Water, lying in a pool ahead of him, less than a yard away. He moaned aloud and moved on, knowing it would fade again before he reached it.

His hand reached out to claw at sand and came back covered with slime, wet and cool. Tentatively, he thrust a finger in his mouth, sucking at the muddy residue. Then he knew it was no vision, no mirage. He had made it. He sat back and looked at the pool stretching out before him. Then he laughed, hysterical, crazy laughter that croaked and grated in his throat. He reached out and cupped water from the oozy hoofprint of a cow beside the pool. He raised it to his mouth, muddy and slimy though it was, and let it trickle slowly over his parched tongue. It was nectar. He laughed again, louder.

Then he pitched forward into the mud and lay still, breathing heavily.

They found him there late that afternoon. Frank Coster and one of his riders who had been combing the hills along the river ever since they had spotted the blue roan wandering aimlessly. When they saw the torn and blood-streaked torso they were sure he was dead. But as they got down to examine him and lifted his head a groan escaped his lips. He was still unconscious when they gently tied



him to his saddle and set out with all haste for the little whitewashed ranch house on the long slope above the river valley.

Holt came slowly back to consciousness. His first awareness was the smell of clean sheets beneath him, the yielding softness of a bed on which he lay face down. The torture in his back had faded into a dull throbbing ache. As his vision came into focus he saw there was someone sitting beside him. It was Carol. She was trying to fold a length of clean muslin into something resembling a bandage. As he watched, she turned to look at him and their eyes met.

"You're awake," she said. For just an instant a look of gladness came into her eyes. Then it vanished and gave way to one almost of reproof.

"How did I get here?" he asked.

She told him about the riders. Then she said quietly, "Who did this to you?"

He told her.

She sat for a long time, making no comment, folding the bandage as though he had not spoken. Then, biting her lip, she stood up quickly and began gathering up the muslin as if to leave the room.

Holt raised himself with an effort, caught her gently by the arm. "Carol," he said huskily, "I'm not much good with words—especially at a time like this. I don't know how you got those ideas about Rhea Fairbrother and me. I hate her, sure. But not for the reason you think. Not because I'm jealous of Clive Marsham. Hell, he can have her. I . . ." He paused, groping for a way to put it. Then he said uneasily, "Carol, I want you to marry me."

She looked at him, then shook her head slowly. "No you don't, Holt," she said, a tinge of bitterness in her voice. "There was a day once when I'd hoped to hear you say that. But not now. Not the way things are. You only think you want me now that she's treated you this way."

"That's not true," he said firmly.

"Don't lie, Holt," she said in tearful anger. "You forgot about me the very hour she arrived. You didn't come to my dance; you stopped coming here at all. I can't blame you, I guess, for being fascinated by her. She's one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. Even if she is somebody else's wife. I can understand. But don't expect me to

pick up where we left off, Holt, just because she's disillusioned you. I've got my pride, too, and—"

She broke off at the sounds of footsteps outside and turned away. Holt held her arm. "Carol!" he said. But she shook her head, pulled free and went to open the door.

Frank Coster stepped into the room, followed by another man about Holt's age. Holt recognized him as Jack Layton, who ran a two-man spread a few miles east of Coster's place. Layton's gaze wasn't exactly friendly. He followed Coster up to the foot of the bed, replying to Holt's greeting with a curt nod of his head.

Coster cleared his throat and said self-consciously, "Holt, I'm goin' to get right to the point. We need water and we need it bad. As a neighbor . . ."

Holt sighed heavily. "Frank, I wish I could make it rain. That's about the only thing that'll help any of us. But my Herefords take a lot of water. There's not much left for them on Cross W."

"Some folks say differently, Holt."

"Who says differently, Frank?" Holt snapped irritably. "Studdal and that ragged-shirt bunch of booze louts who did this?"

Coster glanced at Holt's back and his face softened. "That was a damn shame, Holt. I know things are pretty rough, but they oughtn't to have lost their heads like that. How do you feel, anyway?"

"Just mad enough to want to gunwhip the next man who mentions Cross W fence, that's all."

Frank laughed, a little uneasily, and glanced at Layton.

Holt caught the significance of the glance. His face tightened grimly. "I can't do it, Frank," he said with quiet firmness. "If I let your cows in I'd have to let others; and God only knows how long the water'll last for our own Herefords. Hell, you're right on the river. Don't tell me you haven't got water?"

Coster shrugged. "Enough for two, three days. But I reckon I'm better off than a lot of folks at that." He paused, then said almost apologetically, "Holt, I don't like goin' over your head, but I think I ought to talk to Old John."

"You can't, Frank. He doesn't even know there's a drought; that's how bad off he is. If he knew there was a situation like this, it would likely be the end of him."

Layton spoke up for the first time, directing his words

at Frank Coster. "Looks to me like there might be somethin' in what Marsham's been sayin', Frank." Coster gave Holt an uneasy glance, let his eyes drop quickly away.

"What's Marsham said, Layton?" Holt asked. "That I've got enough water for the whole Panhandle; and that I'm too damn mean to let anybody have any?"

Holt's candid manner took Layton by surprise. "Well," he began uneasily, "somethin' like that."

"That's easy enough settled," Holt snapped. "All you've got to do is ride the river west through Cross W and see for yourself."

Layton snorted. "Sure, and get shot goin' through your fence. That's just about what Marsham figured you'd—"

"Marsham! Damn Marsham—don't you people have any brains of your own? And while we're on the subject, why didn't you start moving your cows down river when you saw this drought was here to stay? Why the hell did you wait until you got down to your last wet gunnysack before you started worrying about water? Or did you think Marsham was going to make it rain?"

Layton flushed angrily. "There's no call to act so damn high-and-mighty, Shepway. Smart talk ain't goin' to change the facts. Maybe it's time folks begun to concern themselves with what goes on behind your bob wire, since its beginnin' to look like we're the ones that's got to suffer for it."

"What goes on behind that fence, Layton, is nobody's damn business. Remember that," Holt snapped angrily. Then he turned to Coster. "So Marsham's been drumming up war talk about the fence, has he? I suppose he's made everybody believe that once the fence is down and Cross W's overrun, everything'll be all right, that it?"

Frank Coster nodded. "Pretty close."

"And I suppose he lays the whole blame on me?"

Frank hesitated, then shrugged. "He builds a pretty strong case for them—that's ready to listen. He says you won't let nobody talk to Old John; and that John's wife wants to open the fence but that you won't let her."

"Doesn't it seem just a little funny that John's wife has waited all this time for *me* to come back and open that fence?"

"What you mean, Holt?" Coster said quizzically.

"I've been gone six weeks. If she really felt that fence ought to be opened, she's had plenty of time to do it."

"You mean—you mean she's tryin' to put the whole load on your shoulders, is that it?"

Holt avoided a direct answer. There were still some things better left unsaid, out of loyalty to Old John. If these men wanted to guess a few things about Rhea and Marsham, let them. He had other things to worry him right now. If he opened the fence to appease those who would tear it down, it would mean ruination for Cross W. John Fairbrother would have neither the physical strength nor the financial resources to withstand the consequences. The ruin of his life's work would send the old man to his grave. Rhea and Marsham would have won the fight; and they would have won it in smug hypocrisy while pretending to be concerned with the welfare of the underdog, the little ranchers.

On the other hand, Holt knew that if he continued to cling stubbornly to his vow to defend Cross W against all comers, it could mean a range war, with all the attendant chaos and bloodshed which would probably mean the death of Old John in his present enfeebled state.

Either way, John Fairbrother was likely to die. And either way, Rhea and Clive Marsham seemed sure of almost certain success. But if Holt chose to fight, and he felt certain they knew he would, then Rhea could point the finger of accusation at him and say that it was his fault the old man had died.

Holt turned to Carol who was standing, her back to him, gazing out of the window. "Carol, would you mind leaving the room? I'd like to get dressed."

She caught her breath and spun around, taking a hesitant step toward him. "Holt—you're not fit to travel!" Then, as if quickly regretting her display of concern for his welfare, she turned quickly and left the room.

Holt waited until she had closed the door. Then he swung his feet over the edge of the bed, sat straight with an effort. He glanced out of the window. Long shadows were settling across the sloping hills. It was nearly sundown. With a grimace of pain he gestured toward his boots standing in the corner. "Frank, hand me my boots."

Coster frowned, picked up the boots hesitantly. "Carol's right, Holt. You ain't in no shape to ride. What you aimin' to do, anyhow?"

Holt stood up stiffly and took his boots from Frank, sitting on a chair to pull them on. "I'm going to take you

and Layton for a little ride up the Canadian. I'm going to show you every water hole on Cross W. And when I've finished maybe you'll see what I mean about Marsham."

He took his pants from the back of a chair and got into them, glancing at first one and then the other of the two cowmen. "I never thought I'd see the day a neighbor of mine wouldn't take my word for what it was worth. But if Marsham's got you hog-tied and blinded I guess I've got to do something." He paused in the act of reaching for his gunbelt and looked at Coster. "Hell, Frank, you've been around this country a long time. Can't you see what's going on? Marsham wants Cross W. He wants it because it'll give him unbroken range all the way from the Oklahoma Panhandle right down across the Canadian. He's tried to buy it, but John won't sell; so he'll get it any way he can. And he'll get it the way he's got everything he ever owned—by being slick and smart and using his brain to get people like you to do the dirty work for him. He's got you all worked up over water and that fence until you're ready to believe they're to blame for the drought. And he's got every dirty-shirt drifter in the Canadian Valley all worked up thinking they're going to have free run of Cross W when that fence comes down. But it's not coming down."

Holt reached for his shirt, drew it on carefully, wincing as it touched his back. Coster looked sheepishly at Layton, then glanced uncomfortably at his boots and cleared his throat and said nothing.

Holt began buttoning his shirt. "Frank, you've seen droughts in this country before. You know where there are holes you can count on even in bad times like these. How come you waited so long before moving your cows down there?"

Coster shifted his feet uneasily. "Well, I thought about that, Holt, only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Well, Marsham said there wasn't no need to flog our cows drivin' them fifty to a hundred miles when there was plenty of water just across the fence. Said it was only a matter of talkin' to you in the right way to get you to let down that wire."

Holt snorted. "Sure. And me damn near a thousand miles away in Chicago. Don't you reckon he knew how things would stand by the time I got back?"

"Supposin' it had rained?" Layton said suspiciously. "Or do you think Marsham fixed that, too?"

Holt threw him a look. "Marsham's a gambler; he took a chance it wouldn't rain. Knowing this country in a drought, it wasn't much of a gamble, either." He picked up his hat. "All right, I'm ready."

Frank Coster shook his head and sighed. "Ain't no need, Holt. I'll take your word about the water and—"

"He might be bluffin', Frank," Layton interrupted. "If he's willin' to ride, I'll ride along. If there ain't no water, then I want to see for myself. He says one thing, Marsham says something else. Two big ranchers playin' the little man in between 'em. I ain't trustin' nobody."

"That suits me, Layton," Holt said sharply and started for the door. He was just reaching for the doorknob when somebody said, "Listen!"

They heard the faint sound of hoofbeats, drawing closer down the sun-baked slope behind the cabin. Frank Coster stepped to the window. "It's your brother, Holt. It's Chuck."

Holt looked at him. "Does he know I'm here?"

Coster nodded. "I sent word up to Cross W that we'd picked you up."

Holt opened the door and walked through the cabin to the front and down the steps into the yard. The others followed. Carol was already there, shielding her eyes against the sun as she watched Chuck slow his mount and round the gatepost in a cloud of dust to dismount.

Chuck came forward leading his mount, touching his hatbrim to Carol, nodding to the others. Then he looked at his brother and said, "I got bad news, Holt. Dan Pardue took a couple of shots at some fence-busters this afternoon and killed one of them. Then Dan got shot himself. He's dead, Holt. Dan's dead."

Carol gave a little sob and turned away to cover her face with her hands. Holt stared for a moment in shocked disbelief. "Dan Pardue *dead*?"

Chuck nodded silently.

"Who'd he shoot at?" Layton asked.

"Feller named Allison. Him and four or five others tried to run a bunch of cows through the fence."

Layton glanced sharply at Holt. "I suppose you blame that on Marsham too, huh?" he said angrily. "A little cowman tries to get his herd to water and he gets killed

by Cross W." Before Holt could answer, he turned away and stalked angrily across the yard to his waiting mount and swung out through the gate without another word.

Frank Coster watched Holt's face and said nothing.

Holt turned to look in the direction of the corral, searching for his blue among the mounts nuzzling the cottonwood poles. Chuck caught sight of his brother's shirt, saw the dark patches where the blood was oozing through. "Godamighty," he whistled, wincing. "Who did that."

"More of Marsham's friends," Holt said quietly. "One of them was named Allison." He looked at Coster. "Allison had about as many cows as I've got elephants. Somebody put him up to trying to bust that fence. I'll give you one guess who." To Chuck he said, "Get word to every man in the outfit—if anybody else tries to cross that fence, shoot to kill!"

Chuck frowned and said uneasily, "Maybe you're acting a little bit hasty, Holt. I had a long talk with Rhea and she thought maybe I'd better come down and talk to you. So far nothing's happened that can't be patched up, if we work it right. The score's even—one man to a side. What's the use of—"

Holt paused in the act of turning for the corral and glared at him. "Who's running this outfit, anyway? Me or her?"

Chuck reddened angrily. "Now listen here, Holt. What Rhea says makes sense. If you're goin' to carry your bull-headed feud with her right into a range war before you'd back down. . . ."

Holt took a step forward. "Now you listen to *me*. I've been on this range since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. My mother and father are buried under a cottonwood tree down along the Canadian. Maybe you've forgot, but they're your folks, too. They died trying to settle this country. I've put a lot of sweat and blood and fighting into this range. And Old John put in a damn sight more long before I ever got here. He can't speak for himself now, so I'm speaking for him. And I'm not going to sit by and see this range taken over by anybody."

"Just who do you mean," Chuck said hoarsely, "by anybody?"

"I mean *anybody*," Holt snapped. "Now get on that horse and get going. And remember what I said. Make

sure the word gets around. From now on anybody who tampers with Cross W fence is a candidate for Boot Hill."

Chuck broke away with an angry stride and mounted his horse. Holt watched him jerk the animal around and clatter out of the yard, heading for the long slope toward Cross W territory.

"I'll go saddle your horse," Frank Coster said quietly and left.

Holt turned to say something to Carol, but no words came. Their eyes met, held. Then she turned away and walked quickly into the house.

Holt stood there, debating whether to follow. Then he heard the squeak of gear as Coster led the roan across the yard and he turned away.

His knees felt unsteady before he had gone half a dozen steps. Frank held the blue and watched him closely while he tried to mount. Holt felt himself reel giddily and he had to lean against the horse's shoulder for support.

"You ain't in no shape to travel, Holt," Frank said again.

"I'll be all right once I get going," Holt said. He glanced at the saddle boot and felt a sense of confidence when he saw the Winchester was still there. With a sudden effort he pulled himself up into the saddle and took the reins. He had to wait a minute, gritting his teeth, until the pain had passed. Looking down at Frank he said, "No hard feelings, Frank?"

Coster tried to smile. "That's askin' an awful lot of human nature, ain't it, Holt?"

Holt smiled grimly. "Yeah. Yeah, maybe it is at that, Frank."

He turned the roan and went out of the yard at a walk. By the time he reached the crest of the ridge half a mile up the slope he wondered if maybe he shouldn't turn back; the pain was excruciating. He halted the blue and turned around to look back. They were standing there watching him, two silent figures casting long shadows in the soft orange light of the sunset. He raised his arm and waved. They didn't wave back. He gave a sigh and urged the roan over the crest and on toward the rolling hills beyond.

It was almost midnight when he saw the lights of the house winking through the cottonwoods along the creek. He rode slowly across the flats, slid wearily from the saddle beside the front gate. For a long time he leaned against



the gatepost, until the dizziness left him. Then he started up to the path, reeling unsteadily. A shadow filled the lamplight in the doorway and he stopped and looked up. She was standing there, watching him; her face was a flat mask, devoid of compassion or expression of any kind.

"I want to talk to you," he said thickly, dragging the words out with an effort. She seemed to be swaying in the doorway, fading, then coming clearer. He put a hand to his eyes to clear his vision.

"What about?" she said tonelessly.

His smile was mirthless. "About . . . about a lot of things," he said. He started up the path toward the steps. They began to move; forward, then away from him. He reached out to grab the bannister, feeling giddy. It melted away under his grasp and he felt himself slipping down, slowly, quietly, into something soft and yielding like black velvet.

Hours later he remembered seeing Doc Edwards standing beside the bed in the lamplight, emptying a powder into a glass, holding it out to him. "He'll be all right," the doctor was saying. "He's exhausted, that's all. A little sleep will do him a world of good. This'll fix him up."

He felt his head being raised, something liquid was forced through his lips, bitter, nauseous. Then came the blackness again.

Faint starlight seeped in through the open window when he opened his eyes again. He felt rested, but weak. His back burned like fire from the sun and the gashes, but the heavy, painful throbbing was gone. It seemed remarkable to him that a few hours sleep could make such a difference. He had no way of knowing he had slept for two days and halfway through the second night.

The starlight seemed to fade as he lay there. A cool breeze began to sigh through the open window, stirring the curtains. And then suddenly it was daylight. His eyes searched the sky outside the window. It was blue and cloudless in the light of early dawn. He swung his feet out of bed, reaching for his boots. Then he stopped as the sound of an angry voice came from the front of the house. He recognized the voice immediately. It was Marsham's.

Holt pulled on his boots and levis hurriedly, crossing to the door without waiting to put on his shirt. The voices seemed to be coming from the parlor; Marsham's and

Rhea's. He heard her say, as he walked toward the room, "Don't try to push it too fast, Clive, or you'll ruin everything. The old man can't last much longer; think of the trouble that will save us."

"But, dammit, woman, my cows need water! It's gone beyond just play-acting."

"Clive, if you'll just be patient I'm sure I can persuade Holt to—" She heard his footsteps and broke off, her face flushing guiltily when she saw him standing there.

He knew, from the way they looked at him in that brief instant, that they were both trying hard to think what they'd been saying, wondering just how much he'd overheard. He decided quickly that it was best to pretend he'd heard little. Rhea's last words gave him the cue he needed. "Go on," he said quietly, "you'll persuade me to do what?"

It was Marsham who recovered his wits first. "Shepway," he roared angrily, "I'm fed up with being cut off from water by that damned fence of yours. Two men have been killed already. Let's stop it there. I've got fifteen thousand head of longhorns bunched up along your north fence. *Fifteen thousand!* If they don't get to water within four days at the very latest every damn one of them will die. Now what do you say?"

"I'd say you waited a hell of a long time before you thought about getting them to water."

Marsham looked puzzled. "What kind of an answer is that? I want to know if you're going to let down that fence."

Holt lounged easily against the doorway and said, "Listen, Marsham, that fence works two ways. It keeps your cows off my range, and it keeps mine off yours. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"No, by God!" Marsham thundered. "It's not! My cattle need water, and they need it bad."

"Then maybe you'd better drive 'em around the fence and get 'em down to the river if they need water that bad."

Marsham controlled himself with an effort. "Shepway, for God's sake listen to reason, will you? The nearest water for a herd the size of mine is more than twenty miles up the Canadian—a total drive of just over fifty miles. They wouldn't make it, the condition they're in. Not a damn one."

"And just what the hell do you think our water holes

will look like when you get through running fifteen thousand thirsty steers through them?" Holt snapped. "This drought isn't broken yet by a long way. And if it doesn't break soon we'll be looking for water ourselves by the end of next week." He straightened up to turn away. "No, Marsham. It's tough. But we've got cattle, too. That fence stays where it is."

He was starting through the door when Marsham's voice stopped him. "All right, Shepway, you've made yourself plain enough. Now I'll tell you something. Like I said, my cows can stick it out just about another four days. Well, four days from now I aim to water my herd. And I don't intend to have to drive fifty miles to do it. So you can take your pick. Open the fence now, or in four days I'll open it for you."

Holt turned around slowly, started across the room. He stopped inches from Marsham's smooth-shaven sallow face. "You've wanted to see your cows on this range for a long time, haven't you, Marsham? You know you can't buy it; you've tried that. And you can't whip it out of people with barbed wire; you've tried that, too. There's just one way you might get it. But if I was you, I wouldn't try that."

Marsham glared hostilely for a moment, then his face twisted in a confident smile and he glanced at Rhea. "Maybe I know another way, Shepway. An easier way."

"And maybe," Holt said carefully, "that's the way I'm warning you not to try."

"What the devil's all this rumpus about?"

Holt spun around at the sound of the voice, saw Old John standing there in his long nightshirt, leaning on a cane and clutching the door for support. "Clive, was that you I heard yellin'? What's the matter, anyway?"

Rhea gave a gasp and rushed to his side. Holt smiled sardonically at the sight of her playing the part of the dutiful wife. "John, she pleaded. "You mustn't concern yourself. You must go back to bed! The doctor said—"

"The hell with the doctor!" the old man snapped gamely. "If somethin's wrong, I want to know about it. Clive, you was makin' the most noise. Suppose you tell me what you've got all upset over?"

Holt started to intervene, knowing that any undue excitement might start the fatal blood clot moving towards the brain. He shot a warning glance at Marsham and said soothingly, "It's all right, John. Just a little misunder-

standing, that's all. It's all settled now, isn't it, Marsham?"

Marsham read the warning in his eyes, and he deliberately ignored it. "You'd like to think it was, wouldn't you, Shepway?" Then he turned to the old man and said, "Fairbrother, I've got fifteen thousand head of steers dying for lack of water and Shepway won't let them through your fence to get to the Canadian. Maybe you'd better tell him to—"

Old John's eyes shifted to Holt. "Water? Are we havin' water troubles, Holt?"

"Everybody is, John," Holt said quietly. "There's been a drought since spring." He quickly explained the situation, omitting all mention of previous trouble. He finished up by saying, ". . . but if we let anybody through that fence we'll be out of business ourselves inside of a week."

While he had been talking the old man's keen eyes noted the pained way Holt held himself, noted the absence of a shirt. "Holt," he snapped, "turn around."

Holt stiffened a little. "Why, John?"

"Turn around, dammit!" Old John said, stabbing the floor angrily with his cane.

Holt hesitated, then he turned, slowly. There was an awkward silence. Then the old man said hoarsely, "Who did that, Holt?"

"Why—I got hung in a stirrup, John. Got dragged through some wire along a fence the boys were fixing."

The old cowman eyed his foreman in silence for a minute. Then he said quietly. "That's a lie, Holt. And a damn poor one at that. You never got hung in a stirrup in your life." He switched his gaze to Marsham. "I got a suspicion that there's more been goin' on around here than I been told. Marsham, you know anythin' about this?"

Marsham was thoughtfully silent for a minute. His eyes flicked to Rhea, then to Holt, then back to the old man. His teeth parted in a soundless laugh and he said, "Yeah, I know a little about it, John. I know Cross W has got too big for its britches. A lot of people around here are fed up with being fenced out, including me. What happened to Holt is just a friendly warning, compared to what might happen. If you don't open that fence of your own accord, then—"

"Are you threatenin' me, Marsham?" Old John roared.

"Just giving you a little friendly advice, that's all, John," Marsham said silkily.

"So—" John said slowly, "that's the way it is, eh, Marsham? I think I'm beginnin' to see a few things I've overlooked."

Holt held his breath, hoping, for John's sake, that the old man had not guessed the whole truth. He kept his eyes averted from Rhea with an effort as the old cowman went on, his voice grating with anger, growing louder.

"You tried to buy it, but you couldn't get it that way. Then you started trouble over the fence, until you found out I had a wife and started actin' friendly, hopin' you'd be able to fast-talk her into gettin' me to sell. And that didn't work, either. Now you're afraid I'm goin' to die and leave it three ways—to Rhea, Holt and Chuck. You'd never get it then, would you, Marsham? No. You're only chance is to make a big ruckus about that fence, get everybody stirred up against Cross W, hopin' it'll start a feud that'll wipe us out. Then all you have to do is step in. You had it pretty well worked out, didn't you?"

"I'm telling you, Fairbrother," Marsham flared. "Unless you open that fence—"

"Get out!" The old man raised his cane, struck angrily at Marsham.

"John," Rhea steadied him, trying to turn him away. "You mustn't get excited. You must get back to bed!"

He threw her off with a quickness that surprised Holt. Cane raised, he advanced threateningly on Marsham. "Get off my range, you schemin' coyote. Get off before I—"

Marsham ducked as the cane cracked against his up-raised arm and he darted through the door, shouting angry threats and shaking his fist. Holt leapt for him, but a cry from Rhea brought him spinning around.

He saw Rhea trying to support the old man, but John was slipping from her grasp, his face purple, his breath coming in exhausted gasps. Holt rushed to her side, swept the old man into his arms. "Quick, let's get him into bed."

Rhea was holding the door open when he got there. He laid the frail old body on the bed, swallowing hard at the lump in his throat. The old man's eyes opened. He looked up at Holt. Then a feeble grin crossed his face. "Sure . . . sure sent the sonofabitch asflyin', didn't I?"

Holt laughed with relief and drew the sheet aside to give John more air. "Sure did," he said. "I guess there won't be any trouble from now on."

Old John nodded, closing his eyes and yawning tiredly. "Nope. Won't have no trouble from him. Never . . . never did feel exactly right about that critter."

Holt glanced at Rhea. She stood staring out the window, her back to him. Holt glanced once more at the sleeping figure on the bed, then tiptoed out of the room, his jaw set in a grim line.

The sun had risen now and it was full daylight as he went out of the house and crossed the yard toward the bunkhouse. He went inside and dug a clean shirt and his spare Colt out of his gearbox. Then he went to the cook shack to take a tally of hands. As he stepped inside they taciturnly nodded their welcome at his return. All except Chuck who went on eating.

"Did you get word to everybody like I told you?" Holt asked his brother.

Chuck looked up. "Sure. And it damn near got Clive Marsham shot this morning, too. That would have been a fine mess, wouldn't it?"

Holt began shoveling at the food the cook set before him. Around a mouthful of beans he said, "In some ways it's a damn shame it didn't happen. Might have saved a lot of trouble."

"What do you mean by that?" Chuck said warily.

"He just had a blow-up with John. Says if we don't open that fence inside of four days he'll come through it anyhow."

"Then you'd better let him through, Holt. Rhea doesn't want any more trouble."

Holt's jaws stopped their chewing motion. He raised his face from his plate and glanced sharply at his brother. Then he said scornfully, "Finish your breakfast and let's get going. I want every hand on Cross W's payroll to ride that fence, day and night. And the first outsider who comes near it with a pair of pliers is going to get a Winchester welcome."

Five minutes later Holt led the roan out of the corral and stopped to adjust the cinch while he watched his brother saddling reluctantly. He heard the swish of skirts behind him and turned around.

"Where are you going?" Rhea said calmly.

There was something about her face that made Holt feel uneasy. "I'm doubling the guard on that north fence. Marsham might decide not to wait his four days."

She shook her head slowly. "I won't let you."

Holt put a toe in the stirrup and turned with a grim smile. "Lady, I'm afraid you haven't got much to say about what I do." He shifted his weight to mount when her words stopped him.

"I have now. This is my ranch. John is dead."

## Chapter Thirteen

OLD JOHN WAS DEAD. Holt had expected it to come, sooner or later. But now that it had happened he found it hard to believe. It was not just the end of an old man's life. It was the end of an era. Holt felt no sorrow. Old John would be far happier now. He felt only regret that everything the old man had worked so hard for all his life now belonged to this enigma of a woman who stood before him, defiantly.

Rhea turned to Chuck. "Ride up to Two Bar and tell Clive Marsham I want to see him, right away. Tell him it's business."

Holt stirred from the shocked silence into which the news had plunged him. "You haven't got an ounce of common decency in your whole carcass have you?" His words were low, softly spoken, but they were like the slap of a hand across her face. "He's not even cold yet and you're already planning what to do with the ranch, the money, everything he worked his whole life for."

"Damn it, Holt, shut up!" Chuck said in a voice that was high-pitched with tension.

But Holt's scathing criticism, spoken before the other hands who stood quietly about, had its effect. Rhea's defiance subsided. Her gaze wavered, fell to the ground. "You—you misunderstand me," she said, forcing a sob Holt felt she must have practiced before. "I only want to see Clive because he's been such a good friend. At a time like this there doesn't seem to be anyone else I can turn to. So many things have to be done—the funeral arrangements and . . ." She stopped and covered her face with her hands.

"I'll take care of the funeral arrangements, Mrs. Fairbrother," Holt said coldly. "Somehow I have a feeling it'd be kinder to John than to have Clive Marsham do it." Holt turned deliberately away from her and said quietly to Chuck, "Ride up and tell Marsham what's happened. Even he ought to have sense enough not to try anything until after the funeral. And tell the boys to come on back here. I'll ride into town and get the undertaker."



He mounted the roan as Chuck moved away. One of the other hands asked quietly, "When do you reckon they'll have the funeral, Holt?"

Holt passed a hand across his forehead. "Tomorrow morning, I reckon. With this weather as hot as it is. . . ." He left the rest unsaid. The other riders withdrew respectfully. He found himself alone with Rhea.

She avoided his eyes as she stood there, her hands clasped tightly together, gazing out across the empty expanse of hills. "Mrs. Fairbrother," Holt said with restraint, "before you take over the operation of this ranch completely, maybe you'd better wait until after the will's been read."

Her head jerked sharply to look at him. "The will?" There was a note of uncertainty in her voice; as though the word suggested something sinister. "But—is that necessary? I thought . . ."

"You thought you'd sell the ranch to Marsham, let him fire me, then you could marry him and everything would be all set? It would have to work that way, wouldn't it, Mrs. Fairbrother? Because we both heard John say that I'd have a job here for life; as long as you didn't sell the place." He smiled thinly before he went on. "But nobody's sure just how Old John's will might read. It might make a difference."

He turned the roan and went out of the yard at a walk, knowing she would be watching him, hating him. He didn't look back.

It was a sombre procession that would its way out of Clear Creek the following morning. It passed along the rutted track that wound up the knoll behind the town where the cemetery lay behind its rusting iron fence. Holt, in a black broadcloth suit that had once been John Fairbrother's, drove the buckboard in the wake of the parson, who was mounted on a black scarecrow of a horse. Beside him sat Rhea in her widow's weeds, her face partly hidden by the black tulle veil. She kept her eyes straight ahead. No word had passed between them.

Behind them in the rickety black-painted wagon that served as a hearse, surrounded by a mounted guard of Cross W riders, came the cottonwood box bearing the mortal remains of John Fairbrother. On top of the coffin lay a few withered geraniums, all the flowers that had

survived the drought gripping the whole of Tomosa County.

At a respectful distance behind the hearse came the friends and acquaintances who wanted to pay their last respects to the man whose name had for half a century been legend in the Texas Panhandle. The Costers were there. Marsham, looking suitably mournful, was discreetly though prominently present. In the van, straggling along on foot and on horseback, came the curious; the people who had known John Fairbrother by reputation only, and who had heard rumors concerning the lovely young widow, a hint of foul play, and the barbed wire.

It was Chuck who rode up and dismounted beside the buckboard at the cemetery gate to help Rhea down. Holt dismounted and stood beside them, conscious of the awkward silence and the curious glances which followed their every move. Six Cross W hands pulled the coffin from the hearse and lifted it onto their shoulders. At a sign from the parson standing bareheaded beside the open grave, Chuck gave Rhea his arm and Holt fell in beside them as they moved in the wake of the pallbearers.

The heat was oppressive. The sun beat down unmercifully. A feeble dust-whirly moved across the cemetery, causing the mourners to shield their eyes.

*"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to pay final tribute . . ."*

The parson's voice droned on, intoning the words of the burial service. Holt glanced about him at the faces surrounding the grave. How many, he wondered, were here to pay tribute? How many were here out of curiosity? His eyes fell on Marsham, head sanctimoniously bowed, standing beyond the fringe of the crowd. And how many, he wondered, were here to wait?

*"... dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return."* The parson raised his hand and let the ceremonial handful of dirt rattle hollowly onto the cottonwood box. The six pallbearers, their shirts plastered to their backs with sweat, strained, let the ropes slip through their hands. The coffin bumped loudly on the bottom. Then it was over.

They left as they had come; Rhea, dry-eyed, on Chuck's arm, Holt walking stiffly beside them, his face set.

As they reached the gate Marsham came forward, his hat in one hand, the other outstretched toward Rhea. He

glanced at Holt and said, "I'm terribly sorry about this, Shepway."

"You should be," Holt said. "You brought it on."

He heard Rhea's astonished gasp as he moved away, noted the way the onlookers glanced at each other. Chuck came up beside him as he waited at the buckboard. "Now what the hell did you want to say something like that for?" Chuck said reprovingly.

Holt looked at him for a minute in silence. Then he turned to watch Marsham and Rhea who were lost in earnest conversation. "I'll take your horse, Chuck," he said. "You drive her to the lawyer's office. I don't think I could stand it."

He turned away before Chuck could reply, making his way through the crowd, stopping now and then to acknowledge a word of sympathy. He was glad when at last he found Chuck's mount and was in the saddle riding slowly toward town, weighted down with his thoughts.

He didn't know what he expected from the will but he had hope; hope that even in his blind infatuation Old John had been businesslike enough to foresee what might possibly happen and to guard against it. But then he recalled the way the old man had proudly said: "It's only natural for a man to leave everything to his wife, Holt." That made him wonder. . . .

The lawyer was a thin, nervous young man who hustled about when Holt entered, pulling up chairs, coughing politely and calling him Mr. Shepway. He had been suffering from consumption in an Eastern city when some doctor had suggested he might benefit by the dry air of the Western plains. Now, ostensibly cured, he was desperately trying to wring enough income from his pitiful law practice to enable him to return to a country more suited to his civilized nature.

Having got Holt comfortably settled in a chair, he sat behind his desk, alternately folding and unfolding his hands and re-arranging the papers on his desk. "Er—I presume the other heirs will be along presently, Mr. Shepway?"

"The *other* heirs?" Holt said quickly, a note of surprise in his voice. "You mean, there's more than one?"

The lawyer reddened at his own indiscretion. "Ah-hum . . . Well, there are several persons *mentioned* in the will.

Perhaps that would be more correct. But—er—shall we wait until—I mean, Mrs. Fairbrother and your brother are coming, aren't they?"

"Yes," Holt said deflated, "they'll be along in a minute."

They sat in silence in the oppressive heat. Holt crossing and uncrossing his legs with growing irritation as the time dragged on with no sign of Rhea or Chuck. The lawyer tried to assume an air of professional business which would make his service seem more valuable. He lifted dusty-looking tomes from a bookcase and perused them, ah-humming from time to time and making notes with a scratchy pen on a sheet of paper. A bluebottle fly buzzed around Holt's head until it got on his nerves and he swung at it irritably with his hat, smashing it against the front window with such force that the glass rattled and the lawyer jumped in his seat.

The rattle of a buckboard drew Holt's attention and he craned his neck to look down the street. "Here they come," he said, relief mingling with uneasiness in his voice. He watched them draw up outside and get down. He stood up when they came in and waited impatiently while the lawyer bustled about re-arranging the chairs for them to sit down. Rhea lifted her veil and gave Holt a fleeting glance. She looked nervous, pale. Chuck sat beside her, uncomfortable in his black woolen suit, and glared at the lawyer as though he might be responsible for all his discomfort.

"Ah-hum," the lawyer said finally, taking a legal-looking document from the stack before him and untying the strings. "I imagine we might as well get right into it. I shall read the will, and if there are any questions please don't hesitate to interrupt. He cleared his throat again and began to read:

"I, John Fairbrother, being of sound mind yet aware of the uncertainty of mortal life, do hereby establish this as my last will and testament. . . ."

*Sound mind.* Holt wondered if a man of sixty-eight who had let himself become hopelessly infatuated with a woman more than forty years his junior could be considered so.

". . . to Holt Shepway and Charles Shepway, the sum of two thousand dollars, share and share alike or to the survivor. To each of the hands employed on Cross W ranch at the time of my death, I bequeath the sum of one hundred dollars. . . ."

The lawyer broke in at this stage with an ah-hum and said, "Er—unfortunately these two provisions of Mr. Fairbrother's cannot be met."

"Why not?" Chuck wanted to know.

"Well, you see, Mr. Fairbrother's assets, cash assets that is, are nil, and—"

"You mean there's no money in the bank?" Chuck said in astonishment.

"Ah-hum . . . as a matter of fact there's a slight overdraft."

Holt glanced at Rhea. Could it be possible, he wondered, that Old John had let himself go in debt to buy those Herefords? Or had she somehow managed to get her hands on his money before he died?

Rhea stared straight ahead and said nothing.

The lawyer went on. "And to my wife, Rhea Fairbrother . . ."

Holt felt himself holding his breath.

". . . I leave the remainder of all my goods, estates and chattels, both real and personal, including all land, buildings, fixtures, live and dead stock now known as Cross W Ranch, to the extent of some two hundred and fifty-six thousand acres, as registered in the land records of Tomosa County, Texas. . . ."

Holt felt a chill creep down his spine. Rhea inclined her head slightly toward him, a faint, jubilant smile on her face. She had the ranch, all of it. Everything.

". . . provided . . ." the lawyer was reading, then he stopped to cough and clear his throat, taking a handkerchief from his pocket and unfolding it with careful deliberation.

Holt sat stiffly in his chair. Good God! he thought, won't he ever go on? Provided what?

The lawyer spat genteelly into his handkerchief and refolded it, smiling apologetically. "Er—something in my throat." He reached for a pitcher of water, poured a glass and offered it to Rhea. She shook her head quickly. Holt could see her hands, the knuckles white as she gripped the arms of her chair. She, too, was suffering the torment of waiting.

The lawyer then offered the water to Chuck, who also shook his head. Holt, when his turn came, felt that the unknown provision, whatever it might turn out to be, was worth the agony it was causing Rhea while she waited.

He reached out for the glass. "Thanks," he said, smiling, "it's a thirsty day." He drank, watching Rhea through the bottom of the glass as he tilted it up to drain the last drop. She was sitting as stiffly as ever, staring straight ahead. He could feel Chuck beside him, squirming irritably in his chair. He almost asked for a second glass, out of pure cussedness, but decided against it. He handed the glass back and they all waited while the lawyer took one for himself.

Replacing the bead-weighted square of cloth over the pitcher to keep out the flies, the lawyer dried his lips on his handkerchief and picked up the will. "Ah-hum . . . er, let's see, where were we? Oh, yes. *Provided* that she does not remarry within the course of her lifetime. If she should remarry, then the aforesaid Cross W Ranch, as before described, with all fixtures, stock, etcetera, pertaining thereto, shall be forfeited and shall become the property of the aforementioned Holt Shepway and Charles Shepway, share and share alike, or to the survivor. And be it further provided that Rhea Fairbrother shall not undertake to sell the aforementioned Cross W ranch without the full and express consent of Holt Shepway and Charles Shepway or the survivor; and, furthermore, that upon the death of the said Rhea Fairbrother, ownership of Cross W Ranch, with all that pertains thereto, shall be transferred to Holt Shepway and Charles Shepway, share and share alike, or to the survivor."

Rhea had half-risen from her chair, gripping its arms for support, her face ashen. "Is—is that all?" she asked, calming her voice with an effort.

The lawyer flipped a page. "No, there's a codicil."

"A what?" Chuck frowned.

"A codicil—an addition to the will. It simply states that you and your brother are to be employed by Mrs. Fairbrother, at your present wages, so long as she retains possession of the ranch, and that Holt Shepway shall continue as foreman, in view of Mrs. Fairbrother's inexperience, and that he will be obligated to operate the ranch as he sees fit, providing that it is in the best interests of Mrs. Fairbrother." The lawyer glanced up and said, "That last part may seem a bit ambiguous, but since this is in the nature of, er—well, a family business, you might say, I'm certain you'll have no difficulty abiding by the codicil."

"No, of course not," Holt said, smiling a little. Chuck

shot him a quizzical glance which Holt pretended not to notice. Rhea refused to look at him as she stood up, dropping her veil into place and pulling on her black gloves.

"If there's nothing else," she said quietly, "I'd like to be excused. It's been rather a trying day."

"Of course, Mrs. Fairbrother," the lawyer said, scurrying to assist her. "I understand perfectly. And, er . . . ah-hum . . . please accept my deepest sympathy. I realize how unpleasant this must be for you, and, er—"

"Thank you," Rhea answered curtly as she turned for the door. As she passed Holt she gave him a lingering glance, but she said nothing. When she reached the door she stopped. "Who are all those people?" she whispered.

Holt glanced out the window. Across the street along the boardwalk were gathered a number of people, mostly men. Some of them he recognized. Frank Coster was there with Carol, standing back a little from the rest. But for the most part the crowd was made up of dirty-shirt drifters; the two-bit cowmen Marsham had been stirring up against the fence.

"Those are your neighbors," Holt said with a touch of irony. "They're waiting to find out who's the new owner of Cross W."

Chuck swore softly, jumped forward to open the door. "Wait here," he told Rhea. "I'll move the buckboard a little closer."

Rhea laid a grateful hand on his arm and smiled at him. "You're so very kind and thoughtful, Chuck. I can't tell you how much it means to have someone to depend on at a time like this."

Holt watched them step through the door, Rhea leaning on Chuck's arm. Then Chuck left her and walked rapidly down the street to where he had left the buckboard. Holt saw a familiar figure detach itself from the fringe of the crowd across the street. Marsham. The man crossed the street hurriedly, stepped up beside Rhea and took off his hat. They talked for a few minutes, earnestly, rapidly. He saw Marsham glance toward the lawyer's office once or twice, nodding his head.

"Er—ah-hum . . . Mr. Shepway, perhaps it isn't in the best of taste to bring this up just now, but—"

Holt turned, annoyed at the distraction. "Yes, what is it?"

"Er—it's about the fee. You see, in view of the overdraft of Mr. Fairbrother's account at the bank. . . ."

Holt thrust his hand into his inside coat pocket. "All right, how much is it?"

The lawyer coughed embarrassedly. He didn't like asking this way. Back East he'd have sent his bill around in due course. But experience in practicing Texas law had taught him that clients did not always live long enough to receive the bill. Besides, there was that crowd standing outside looking uneasily across at his office, and the rumors he'd heard about the squabble over barbed wire.

"Why—er—it's fifty dollars, Mr. Shepway. Of course, I know that sounds high, but it includes. . . ."

Holt took several bills from his wallet, handed them to the lawyer, then turned for the door.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Shepway. If you'll wait, I'll give you a receipt." But Holt had caught sight of Marsham moving among the crowd across the way and he didn't hear. He stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

Chuck and the buckboard were gone. The Cross W riders who had ridden in for the funeral were lounging beside their horses at the hitch-rail some distance down the street. They stood up when they saw Holt and began untying their mounts. Holt glanced around. The crowd had begun to cross the street, slowly, uncertainly. Holt stepped down from the boardwalk and walked over to where he had left Chuck's mount. He hooked a stirrup over the horn and began adjusting the cinch, his back to them. Somebody coughed to get his attention but he went on with what he was doing as though he hadn't noticed. Then a voice spoke up.

"Say, Shepway, what's gonna happen to that fence?"

Holt finished tucking away the loose end of the latigo with deliberate slowness, let the stirrup drop back into place. Then he turned around to face the man who had spoken. "What do you think's going to happen to it, Morrisey?"

"Well, we don't rightly know. But we just thought, bein' as how the Cross W's got a new owner. . . ."

"Then why don't you ask the new owner?" Holt snapped. He started to turn away when Morrisey said quickly, "But you're still foreman, ain't you? You ought to be able to tell us about the fence."

Holt looked slowly over the crowd, standing ankle-deep



in hot dust that hadn't tasted water in three months. He saw the Russian thistle piled by the dry wind against the boardwalk like a hedgerow. Never in his memory had a drought like this hit the Panhandle. His eyes moved back to the crowd; to the men who seemed to believe that Holt Shepway and barbed wire were the cause of it all. He let his gaze wander over their faces staring at him, waiting, silent, sullen. There was Frank Coster, on the fringe of the crowds as though he didn't want to be a part of it. Carol stood beside him; her gaze met Holt's unwaveringly. With his eyes he talked to her, asking for her understanding, now of all times. But she gave him no encouragement, only a vacant, empty stare.

Jack Layton was there, too; his face hard, belligerent. With one or two exceptions, Holt realized that Layton and Coster were the only members of the crowd who could lay legitimate claim to the name of cowman. The others were there only because Marsham had told them they should be.

"Why do you figure it's any of your business to ask about Cross W fence, Morrisey?" Holt asked levelly.

"Because we got cows that need water, that's why!" Morrisey said, darkening angrily.

Holt smiled. "You could squeeze enough water out of a *cholla* cactus to take care of all the cows you've got, Morrisey."

There was a ripple of angry muttering through the crowd and somebody called out, "See, he don't give a damn what happens to us!"

Clive Marsham pushed forward suddenly. Holt watched him coming and thought how well-timed Marsham was in everything he did. He had waited until just the right moment to step forward and take up his pose as guardian and defender of the interests of the little ranchers.

The crowd fell silent as the Two Bar owner confronted Holt. Marsham glanced back over the crowd, as if to assure them that everything was going to be all right, then he turned to Holt and said, "Shepway, I don't believe it makes much difference whether a man has fifteen cows, like Morrisey here, or fifteen thousand like I have. The point is that each and every cattleman here needs water. You've got water on Cross W. All we want to know is, when are you going to let down that fence and let our cattle through?"

"Outside of Frank Coster and Layton, and maybe one or two others, Marsham, there's not a genuine cattleman in this whole bunch," Holt said. "Those who are cattlemen pretty well understand the situation. They know Cross W's got damn little water of its own." He met Marsham's gaze levelly and added, "So do you, Marsham. You know it better than anybody else." Turning to the crowd he went on, "Anybody here is welcome to ride along the river and inspect every Cross W water hole to see for themselves."

One or two of the genuine ranchers looked at each other and murmured "Fair enough." Marsham saw the reaction Holt's offer had brought and was quick to step in. He spoke up loud enough for all to hear, glancing significantly at the faces around him, "Sure, ride onto Cross W and get the same thing Allison got, huh? I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that, Shepway. If you're sincere you'd open up that fence and give everybody access, share that water. We're all in the same boat—why should you have water while the rest of us see our cattle die outside your wire for lack of it?"

Holt waited for the angry murmur to die away before he spoke up, his own voice sharp with anger now. "Cross W's got the only pure herd of Herefords in the state of Texas, and I aim to keep them pure. John Fairbrother spent damn near forty years and a couple of hundred thousand dollars building up to that herd. I'm not going to let them get polluted with longhorn strain, and I'm going to keep them alive as long as there's a drop of water on Cross W. And that might not be long, because there's damn little left. There's just one other thing: Cross W's not open range, it's private property; bought, paid for and registered as such. A man's got a lawful right to protect his land and what's on it, including water. Does that make it clear enough?"

"In other words," Marsham said in a raised voice, "that fence stays up?"

"I wouldn't advise anybody to try and take it down," Holt said.

The crowd began to break up, muttering angrily. Marsham, smiling, moved away with it. Holt saw Frank Coster and Carol standing dejectedly alone. He crossed over and said, "I'm sorry, Frank. I didn't aim any of that at you. I know you understand how things are."

Coster looked at him. "I know, Holt. But that don't get my cows water, does it?"

For a fleeting moment Holt toyed with the idea of opening the fence to Coster and Layton and one or two others. No, by God, that would be suicide! It would only be a gesture. It wouldn't benefit anybody. Besides, Coster had admitted that he had enough water for a few days. Cross W wasn't any better off. It was only Marsham's clever talk that had led the others to believe that Cross W was knee-deep in water. There was the whole trouble. Marsham, not water.

"No," Holt said grimly, "it sure doesn't, Frank."

Coster nodded and turned away without another word. Holt glanced hopefully at Carol. "You understand, now, don't you?"

"I believe you about the water, if that's what you mean, Holt. But there are other things I'll never understand."

"Such as?"

She glanced significantly in the direction of the lawyer's office. "I hear Cross W's got a new owner. You're free to leave now, but you stayed on. There must be a reason, mustn't there? Maybe I'd wonder—if I really cared anymore."

She turned and walked away to join her father. Then Holt turned around suddenly to find himself under the careful scrutiny of the entire Cross W crew. "How long have you fellas been standing there?" he said.

"Ever since Marsham started makin' a lot of noise," Skeeter Andrews said in a quiet drawl.

Holt suppressed a smile. Instead he said seriously, "We're heading up for a fight, it looks like. I'm not asking any of you to risk your life for eighty miles of barbed wire. Cross W has got a new owner. Mrs. Fairbrother. She doesn't exactly see eye to eye with me about the fence. I'll leave you to draw your own conclusions about that. Things are likely to change a little with Old John gone, but no more than I can help it. I've got a stake in this range that goes back as far as I can remember. I aim to keep that fence up, alone, if I have to. Any of you fellas can draw your pay now if you want to, and no hard feelings."

Skeeter stood looking at his foreman for a minute, then he glanced behind him at the others, thrusting a finger in his ear and wiggling it vigorously. "That's damn funny. I must be goin' deaf. I ain't heard a word he said." He

turned abruptly and walked toward his horse. The others, grinning, followed suit.

They were mounted and waiting for Holt at the edge of town as he rode down the street. Glancing around him as he rode out of Clear Creek, Holt caught sight of three figures standing on the boardwalk talking. One was Carol Coster. She pointedly did not look up when he passed. With her was her father, and the third person was Clive Marsham. Marsham seemed to be doing all the talking.

## Chapter Fourteen

THERE IT IS," Skeeter Andrews said, pointing with a lean forefinger out across the sagebrush flats.

Holt reined the blue alongside and followed the pointing finger. A mile or two beyond where the fence posts marched sentinel-like across the flats he caught sight of a reddish mass, undulating and alive in the first rays of the morning sun slanting across the eastern hills. Marsham's herd.

"That's one hell of a lot of cows," Skeeter observed, hooking a leg over his pommel and rolling a cigarette.

Holt nodded silently, squinting his eyes as he picked out the mounted riders moving leisurely on the fringe of the herd. His eyes were bloodshot from dust and lack of sleep, his face haggard and stubbled with beard. He noted with vague relief that the riders out there were as yet making no move to push the herd, just following its slow movement, keeping it together.

"I think we're ready for them when they come, Skeet," he said.

The weariness in his voice caused the other man to look at him speculatively. "How long since you had any sleep, Holt?"

Holt looked at him and smiled grimly. "Night before last. You don't expect me to sleep with that out there, do you?" He nodded in the direction of the seething longhorns.

Skeeter dragged deeply on his cigarette and contemplated the situation. "I used to think," he said quietly, "that it would be mighty nice to have a job like yours, ramroddin' a big outfit, tellin' a bunch of cowhands to do this an' do that." He shook his head. "But at times like this I'm glad I ain't got much to do but take orders."

Holt grinned. "You'll have plenty to do if they turn that herd this way, son."

"How long do you reckon they're gonna wait?"

Holt shrugged. "Hard to tell. It depends on . . ." Then he stopped. "It depends on a lot of things," he said instead.

Skeeter eyed him knowingly. "I think I know what you

mean, Holt," he said sympathetically. "Nobody in this outfit talks much, but we got eyes."

Holt kept his glance averted as though he had not heard. But he was moved by Skeeter's expression of loyalty. He knew these men would stay with him, no matter what Rhea might try to do.

"Hey, somebody's comin'," Skeeter said, straightening. "Looks like Chuck."

Holt turned in his saddle. Chuck was coming toward them at a casual lope, unhurried. But for some reason Holt felt himself go tense all over. He watched, tight-lipped, as his brother reined in.

"Rhea sent me," Chuck said. "She wants to talk to you."

Holt's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What about?"

Chuck shrugged indifferently. "I dunno. She said some-  
thin' about makin' a deal with you. That's all I know."

Holt turned uneasily and glanced back across the fence where Marsham's restless herd moved among the sagebrush beneath an umbrella of dust. It might be a trap. Some kind of a ruse to get him out of the way. Still, he knew she had lost ground since the will had been read. Maybe she had a legitimate proposition to make—maybe even an offer to sell out to him and Chuck. If that was it, it might be worth talking about. At least it would get her out of the picture, simplify things.

He turned around. "All right, Chuck, tell her I'll be—" But Chuck was already gone, riding back the way he had come, still holding his horse to the same indolent lope. "Well I'll be double damned!" Holt said softly.

Skeeter was watching him with raised eyebrows. "What you reckon this means, Holt?"

"I don't know. But maybe it's as good a time as any to get things settled." His eyes sought out the Cross W riders along the fence. "Still, it might just be a trick to get us off guard."

"Don't you worry about that, Holt. They ain't goin' to catch us nappin'. You go on along and see what's up. We'll make out."

Holt hesitated for a minute. "All right, Skeet. But remember what I told you. Just keep an eye on the fence. Chances are they'll try to sneak somebody in along where the fence runs through brush so they can cut the wire without being seen. Then they'll move the herd in pretty close; move 'em slow like they might be grazing, then turn

them sudden and drive through where the wire's already been cut."

Skeeter nodded. "The first pair of pliers that comes near that wire is goin' to get dropped mighty fast."

"That's the only way," Holt said grimly. "Once they get that herd moving, all hell won't be able to stop it. Night'll be the worst time. There's only a quarter moon. Tell the boys they'll have to use their ears as well as their eyes. Tight as that wire is it ought to sing like a fiddle when they try to cut it."

"Don't worry about it, Holt. We'll manage. You get on back to the ranch and take care of that business—and get yourself some shut-eye, while you're at it."

Skeeter's easy confidence softened Holt's own apprehensions. He nodded his satisfaction and reined the blue around. "So long, Skeet. I'll be back as soon as I can. And I'll send a water wagon up first thing. Thirsty mounts don't work their best."

"Neither do thirsty rannihans," Skeeter grinned. "So long, Holt."

From a low ridge where twisted junipers hid him from sight of the Two Bar herd, Holt stopped to look back. His eyes followed the line of posts standing against the olive sage and parched brown grass. At intervals he picked out the Cross W riders, banded in pairs, sitting quietly, waiting. Already the morning sun was pouring its fierce rays across the Panhandle, re-heating the earth to blast furnace intensity. How long, he wondered, could they wait?

As he turned back he decided to ride part way along the eastern fence in the direction of the Canadian. It might pay to keep an eye open for any activity which might indicate a flank attack.

He had covered some four miles and was about to swing southwest toward the ranch house when he caught sight of a plume of dust rising to the southeast, beyond Cross W fence. He pulled up for a minute, watching. The movement of the dust on the windless air was so slight that it was almost impossible to gauge its direction.

He'd gone some three miles before he spotted it, a herd of some four or five hundred head moving up a shallow valley. The cattle had the tired, shuffling pace of heat-sick and thirsty animals, and even at that distance of a mile or more Holt could tell they were little more than skin-covered bones.

For a considerable time he sat watching the slow progress of the herd, wondering what sane man would be moving cattle northward away from the Canadian. There was no water to the north that he knew of for fifty or sixty miles, and certainly this herd could not survive a drive of half that distance.

Squinting into the sun he counted the riders; one . . . two . . . three . . . four. He made a mental check of neighboring ranchers. The herd was too big for Layton's, and Frank Coster had only two hands. Wait a minute! That rider moving along the far side rode a buckskin. Carol. That made it tally. But why the devil would Frank Coster be moving his herd north? Curiosity overcame his previous feeling of uneasiness and Holt urged the blue down across the sloping valley to intercept the herd.

Frank Coster spotted him first and reined up, waiting. One by one the others followed suit, Carol joining them just as Holt rode up. "Morning, Frank," Holt said amiably. He touched his hat to Carol and got a cold stare for his trouble. He turned back to Coster and said, "You found water up north someplace, Frank?"

Coster nodded. "Yep."

The others looked at him and smiled grimly. All except Carol.

"Say—why, that's fine, Frank!" Holt said, glancing at the slowly moving cattle. "Good thing, too. Those cows could use a little from the looks of 'em. Where'd you find it?"

"The Santa Fe railroad waters all stock in shipment, Holt, you ought to know that."

Holt's smile faded. He glanced sharply at Coster. The man's face was gaunt, haggard. His eyes were hollow and tired. His whole frame drooped dejectedly. Holt said with disbelief, "You're not shipping, Frank? The whole herd?"

"Better'n lettin' 'em die, ain't it?" Coster said flatly.

Holt didn't answer immediately. He glanced from one to the other of the faces around him. In the eyes of each he read the same accusing look. In Carol's most of all.

"But—you're not quitting—not giving up?"

"Not exactly. Sellin' out might be a better way of putting it. Marsham made me a fair offer for the ranch; I found I could get cars to ship the herd. It looked like the best way out so I took it."



Marsham. Holt remembered now how he had seen him in earnest conversation with Coster and Carol on the boardwalk in Clear Creek. He frowned, puzzled. It was a funny move for Marsham to make at a time like this. Holt glanced at the cattle moving slowly up the valley. "But he didn't buy your herd."

"Got enough cows of his own to find water for," Coster said.

Holt was silent for a minute. Then he said sincerely, "I'm sorry, Frank. Damn sorry. I hate to see it happen this way."

Coster waved his hand in a gesture of irritation. "Hell, it ain't your fault I guess, Holt. Not exactly, anyway." He nodded glumly in the direction of the fence stretching away into the distance. "It's that stuff. Bob wire. I don't blame Old John for puttin' it up, nor you for wantin' to keep it up. You both had your reasons. But like I said once before, bob wire's goin' to mean the end of little cowmen in this country. We ain't got the money to put it up; we ain't even got herds big enough to need it. We're just caught in the middle." He straightened in his saddle and sighed heavily, glancing at his riders. "C'mon, fellers. We got a long way to go yet. So long, Holt."

Holt put out his hand. "No hard feelings, Frank?"

Frank glanced at the outstretched hand and hesitated; then he took it. "No," he said, "I guess not."

Carol hung back a little when the others moved off and Holt rode up beside her. "There's not much left for me to say, I guess," he said quietly. "I've already asked you to marry me. A man can't put it much plainer than that."

"It would have made me very happy to have answered yes once, Holt. But maybe it's just as well that I didn't, the way things turned out."

"You still think I'm in love with Rhea?"

"Love, hate, the result is the same either way. Her coming has changed you as nothing else could, Holt. She's that kind of a woman."

She had said it sincerely, without malice. And in his heart Holt couldn't blame her. She was right. Rhea's coming had changed everything.

"Maybe when this is all over . . ." he said hesitantly.

Carol glanced after her father and the other riders who had drawn up at the crest of a rise, waiting for her. "All

over? For me it is all over, Holt. There's a fence between us somehow, and not just a wire one, either." She turned her buckskin, seemingly reluctant to leave, yet knowing she had to. "Well—good-by, Holt."

She offered her hand and Holt took it. They let their eyes meet, briefly, then her hand fell away from his and she spurred her mount. He watched her go. Maybe, he was thinking, there would still be time. It would take them two days, maybe three, to get everything loaded into wagons ready to move. A lot could happen in three days. He turned the roan and set out for home.

The noon sun beat fiercely down on the hardpan flat as Holt crossed the dry creek bed among the parched cottonwoods. There was no coolness in the shade, only less heat. The hot wind stirred the withered leaves above him, rustling them with an autumnal sound. He rode out of the trees toward the outbuildings and noticed a figure coming out of the house to meet him. It was Maria. She was waiting for him beside the corral as he rode up and dismounted.

Her face wore a worried look so he asked, "Anything wrong, Maria?"

Her only answer was to say, "The *señora* wishes to see you right away when you come home, Don Holt."

"I'm coming up now," he told her. "I came here to talk to her anyway."

Maria started to turn away, then she said quickly in a half-whisper, "Things are very bad, no, Don Holt?" Her face seemed suddenly older and Holt realized how much she must have felt when Old John died. She had been his housekeeper for a long time; his death must have touched her deeply. Holt swung down and gave her a pat on the shoulder. "They'll get better, Maria. Soon it will be like the old days again."

She smiled sadly, shaking her head, then she lifted her skirts and ran towards the kitchen before he could see the tears in her eyes.

He tethered the roan beside the corral after they had both drunk long from the cook-well water trickling into the trough. Then he went across the yard and up the path to the house. Maria answered his knock and led him to the parlor. "I go tell the *señora* you are here." There was something in the way Maria looked at him, almost with

reproof, that made Holt wonder. A minute later he heard Rhea's footsteps in the hall and he turned to face the door as she came in.

She was wearing what might have been, on another woman, a simple cotton housedress. But the way she wore it, it looked anything but simple, anything but housewifely. Originally designed to button demurely clear to the throat, Rhea had contrived to leave the majority of the uppermost buttons undone, ostensibly for coolness, and the unbuttoned portion was turned back to form lapels. The effect might have been cool for the wearer; it was decidedly warming for any male observer. Holt kept his gaze averted with difficulty, but he couldn't help noting that apparently little else besides the thin cotton covered her body.

She came toward him, smiling, her skirt swishing rhythmically with her stride, every part of her body moving with a suggestive yet graceful effect. And once again he found himself aware of the heady influence, this woman had on him. Yet as he struggled to remind himself of who and what she was, he became more aware of the truth Carol Coster had spoken. He hated this woman. Hated her more than he ever thought it was possible to hate any thing so lovely, so completely desirable.

"Please sit down, Holt," she said, smiling.

"I'd just as soon stand, Mrs. Fairbrother," he said casually. "What *I've* got to say won't take very long."

She let herself down on the sofa, still smiling at him as she drew her legs up onto the seat, expertly contriving to let the billowing skirt fall so that one gracefully curved leg was exposed to just above the knee. With a casual motion of her hand she drew the skirt down, her eyes not leaving his face. "What did you want to talk to me about, Holt?" she asked in a voice that almost purred.

"I've just come to set a few things straight, that's all. Marsham's going to try to come through the fence, probably as soon as it's dark. You know what that means. I just wanted to tell you to stay here, right in this house, and not try to interfere or you might get hurt. Under the terms of John's will I'm obliged to take any action I see fit in the best interests of Cross W. I aim to do just that. Marsham or nobody else is going to cross that fence, despite what you might have to say. Is that clear, Mrs. Fairbrother?"

He had expected her to show some sign of anger. In-

stead she only smiled. "That's a coincidence, isn't it, Holt? Because I wanted to talk to you about that very same thing. It isn't going to be pleasant, Holt, doing this to you. We might have been friends—" she moved on the sofa, undulating her body a little as though to indicate what that friendship might have entailed; then she went on—"but you seemed determined to be otherwise. It's a pity, too." She let her eyes wander the length of his frame and back again. "You're quite a man. A very handsome man, at that. I would have very much preferred your friendship to Clive Marsham's, but you leave me very little choice." She raised her hands in a helpless gesture.

Holt's eyes narrowed. "Just what the devil are you driving at, Mrs. Fairbrother?" he said coldly.

Her face changed. The smile faded and in its place came a hard, calculating expression. The expression of a woman who knew what she was after. "I've told Clive Marsham he can come through the fence, Holt. I expect him to bring his cattle through some time this afternoon. We're going to join the two ranches, Holt. Cross W and Two Bar. And nothing you can do will prevent it."

Holt stared at her, his face hardening. She continued to smile up at him, confident, cold. "Well," she said, "aren't you going to say something?"

Holt picked up his hat from the chair and said quietly, "Lady, if I were you I'd start packing my guds. Because when I get through with your friend Marsham, I'm coming back—and if you're still here—"

She had got up while he was talking and pulled aside the curtain to look out. Then, as though reassured by what she saw, she turned back to Holt. "I'll be here, Holt. I'll be here long after you're gone."

Holt jammed his hat hard down and went out, glancing uneasily around him as he crossed the yard. There had been something in the way she had gone to that window that he didn't like. It looked as though she might have rehearsed the gesture; like some sort of signal.

He rounded the corner of the bunkhouse and stopped short. Five men stood there. They stood with their feet spread wide apart, their hands resting on their gun butts, their ugly faces made uglier by the way they grinned when they saw him. Ed Studdal spoke first.

"You don't look none too happy to see us, Shepway!"

He showed the stumps of his tobacco-stained teeth and his bulky body shook with silent mirth.

Holt's anger was instinctive. He didn't stop to reason that they were five to his one, and that they had their hands firmly on their guns already.

"Get out!" he snapped. "Get the hell off this range before I—"

Studdal broke in, his grin widening. "Before you what, Shepway?" he said.

Holt saw the futility of it. His right hand clenched and unclenched with helpless rage beside his holstered gun. They would kill him before he could clear leather. He watched Studdal take a lumbering stride toward him.

"That ain't no way for a foreman to welcome new hands, is it, Shepway?"

"New hands!" Holt spun around and glanced at the house. She was standing there on the porch, watching. Now he understood.

"That's right," Studdal chuckled. "You might be the foreman, but you don't do the hirin' around here." Then he added shrewdly, "Leastwise, you don't hold the purse strings, and that's what counts."

Holt's eyes shifted from Studdal's face for a split second, then came quickly back. In that split second he had seen a figure standing quietly in the door of the bunkhouse behind the five men. It was Chuck. Holt felt his heart begin to pound. There was just a chance, if Chuck could divert their attention for an instant that between the two of them they might. . . . Then his heart dropped when Chuck said quietly, "Findin' it a little rough goin', Holt? Not used to havin' people ignore your orders, are you? How's it feel?"

"Are you in on this, kid?" Holt said regretfully.

Chuck stepped down from the bunkhouse, casually rolling a cigarette. He shot his brother a glance as he licked the paper. "I don't know just what you mean, Holt. If you mean, am I takin' orders from Rhea, the answer is yeah, I am."

Holt heard the light pad of footsteps coming up behind him accompanied by the soft swish of her skirts. Without looking at her, Holt said to Chuck, "You damn fool! Can't you see what she's trying to do?"

Chuck dropped the cigarette without lighting it, his

hand flashing to his gun, a look of anger darkening his face. "I can see what she's doing—she's tryin' to keep this range together, tryin' to keep you and your damn bull-headed ways from spoilin' everything we got."

Holt felt himself go numb. There was a brassy taste in his mouth. She had stacked the deck and stacked it well—right down to Chuck; she'd made the kid the Joker. He searched his mind desperately for some way to stall, some way to get them off guard. He turned to Studdal.

"You're the biggest sucker of all," he sneered. "You and your trigger-happy crew here. What do you think you're going to get out of this, huh? I suppose you think she's going to keep hired gunhands around so's everybody'll guess what's happened when this is over? Hell, get smart, mister! You can bet your bottom dollar that she and Marsham are going to keep their hands clean. You won't even be left alive to be seen leaving this place."

He knew he was just making talk, stalling for time. But there was just enough grain of truth in what he said to cause Studdal to shift his eyes speculatively to Rhea.

It was Chuck who spoiled it. "You keep tryin' to blame her for anything and everything. Maybe you ought to take a look in a mirror if you want to see the man who's responsible."

"Shut up!" Holt snapped angrily. "It seems the older you get, the dumber you act. If you had half a brain you'd have been able to see right from the start what kind of a conniving bitch this woman—"

*"Stop it, Holt."*

Chuck almost screamed it, his face contorted with rage, his hand shaking with anger as it brushed dangerously near the butt of his Colt. "Now you listen to me," he said in a voice that was almost a whisper, taking a step towards Holt. "You've told me to shut up once too often. You've pushed me around ever since I can remember and I'm damn sick and tired of it. I been waitin' for you to try it just once more. Maybe you didn't notice, but I turned twenty-one three months back, and I been just waitin' for you to try to shove me around once more."

He stopped, spraddle-legged, his eyes glaring, his face quivering with emotion. "Now it's my turn, Holt. You're goin' to take back what you just called Rhea. Go on, take it back, damn you!"

Holt hesitated. He hadn't meant to drive Chuck to this

pitch. But now that it had happened it might be the chance he needed. He glanced at Studdal and the others. They were watching Chuck, their eyes hard, expectant. Holt thought rapidly. Chuck had never been particularly fast with a gun, nor particularly accurate. Right now he was making the mistake of standing within arm's reach of Holt. It would be easy to slap the kid's gun down before it more than cleared the holster. That would give him the time he needed.

"Go on, Holt—I'm waitin'!"

Holt drew his breath through his teeth. "I just called her by her right name, that's all. She was born a bitch and she'll always—"

He saw Chuck's hand blur as it clawed the gun. His own left hand shot out to slap it down, and at the same time he reached for his gun, half-turning to face the five.

The sudden roar of Studdal's forty-five rocked on the air. Stunned, Holt paused in mid-draw. He saw Chuck's look of agony mingled with surprise; saw his brother's eyes glaze over as he crumpled into the dust and lay still.

Then somebody was shoving a gun in his ribs and saying, "Don't try it, Shepway, or you'll get the same."

He was dimly aware of one of Studdal's men lifting his Colt from his holster. His eyes blurred with angry tears as he turned to look at the limp figure in the dust. The last words he had spoken to his brother had been in anger—the thought swept over him, sickening him. Chuck was dead.

It was Rhea's voice that snapped him back. "You damn fool!" she was saying to Studdal. "I told you I didn't want anything like that to happen here!"

Studdal shrugged, flipping aside the loading gate and ejecting the spent cartridge. "Well, he shouldn't of tried it, lady. I been waitin' too long for a chance at Holt to let anybody cheat me out of it."

"Well get this thing out of here," Rhea snapped, looking down at Chuck's body. "Get it out of here before somebody comes along and sees it!"

Holt stared at her, feeling the chill impact of her cold, callous brutality. She looked up and saw him watching her. She waved an arm in his direction and yelled at Studdal, "And get *him* out of the way, too. Only I hope you've got sense enough not to do it where it might be seen."

Holt found himself still staring at her, groping for words

despicable enough to express his feelings for her right then. But he could find none.

She saw his look and gave a laugh that bordered on hysteria. "Well, what did you expect? You had your chance—but you threw it in my face. You chose it this way, now you can take the consequences."

"Lady," Holt found himself saying hoarsely, "you haven't seen the last of me. Before I'm through with you I'll see you in hell where you belong."

She smiled at him. But like he had never seen her smile before. "Take him away," she said quietly, coldly. Then her composure broke, and she turned and ran for the house, sobbing.

Holt watched her until the house swallowed her up. Then the grunting of Studdal's men broke into his consciousness and he turned slowly. They were lifting Chuck's body, like a sack of meal, draping it across a saddle. One arm hung down, lifeless. Something fell on the toe of Holt's boot. He looked down. It was blood, glistening black in the sunlight, congealing slowly. His brother's blood.

Studdal had been watching, expecting it. He saw the crazed look come into Holt's eyes, saw him start his mad, whirlwind rush that sent two men sprawling before he got close enough so that Studdal could bring the butt of his gun down across the side of Holt's head.

Panting with the effort Studdal shoved his gun away. "Pick him up and tie him on that other horse. It'll make it easier, anyhow."



## Chapter Fifteen

A GRATING, metallic sound drove its way slowly into Holt's consciousness. It seemed to swell the throbbing ache in his head and he shook his head to drive it from his ears. The movement caused his forehead to crack sharply against something and he opened his eyes. He found himself hanging, head down, behind somebody's saddle. The object which had struck his forehead was the butt of a Winchester protruding from a saddle boot. His belly ached with the chafing and his back felt ready to break. He raised his head with an effort to look in the direction from which the grating sound seemed to come.

Late afternoon sunlight made grotesque silhouettes of the five men grouped around the deepening scar in the earth. Two of them bent over shovels, grunting as the blades struck gypsum rock and the metallic, grating noise came again. Then Holt caught sight of the sixth man. He was lying on the ground, eyes staring unseeing at the evening sky overhead. It was Chuck.

Realization flooded back into Holt's aching brain, and with it came the anger and boiling hatred which had accompanied his last conscious moments before Studdal had struck him down. The butt of the Winchester was against his cheek. He tugged at the ropes which fastened his hands to his feet beneath the horse, but they did not budge. The exertion increased the pounding in his brain and he stopped to let it pass.

"Looks like he's woke up," he heard one of the men say. Then came a low chuckle and the sound of footsteps crunching through sandy soil. They stopped beside him and he stared down at a pair of boots. A voice said, "You awake?" It was Studdal's. Holt didn't answer.

A hand clutched his hair and he felt his head being jerked upward. He kept his eyes closed. "Playin' possum, huh?" Studdal laughed. He released Holt's head and began untying his hands. Holt opened his eyes in disbelief, watched the pudgy fingers fumbling with the knots. He rolled his eyes upwards as far as he could without moving his head till he saw the butt of Studdal's gun. It was on the opposite side from him, but it could be reached. He

felt the ropes slip aside, felt the sharp twinge of pain as the blood rushed downward to his fingers. Then Studdal gave a mighty heave and Holt was flung backwards off the horse to land heavily on the ground.

Studdal came around the horse, grinning, waiting for Holt to get his breath. Then he drew his gun. "Get up," he said. "I got somethin' maybe you'd like to see." He gestured with the gun, pointing up the slope where a cattle track led to the top. "Up there," he said.

Holt got slowly to his feet, eyeing the gun. Studdal laughed. "No, now don't get ideas like that, Shepway. Just walk up to the top of that ridge."

Holt complied, staggering a little as his stiff joints refused to cooperate. The path was fairly steep and as he climbed he looked back out of the corner of his eye and could see Studdal following a few yards behind, gun in hand. But Holt noticed something else—the climb was leaving the other four well behind. Maybe, when they got on top of the ridge. . . .

He came to the top and looked around to get his bearings. Then he caught his breath through his teeth. He knew, now, why Studdal had bothered to bring him up here. Below, like a white snake unwinding for miles along the valley, lay the sandy bed of the dry Canadian. Two stagnant pools less than a mile away were almost completely hidden by surging, bawling cattle. Longhorns, mixed with Herefords, but mostly longhorns. Thousands of them.

"So Marsham got through," he said wearily. The words seemed to him a final admission of his defeat. The fence had been breached. God alone knew how; but there was the proof, fifteen thousand head of longhorns trampling, snuffing, sucking up the last precious drops of Cross W water.

He wondered, vaguely, what had happened to the Cross W crew. Maybe it didn't really matter anymore. Just as it didn't seem to matter that his brother's body lay below and behind him in a ravine, without even the benefit of a ragged piece of burlap to hide the vulgarity of death. Not even the fact that he knew the man beside him was waiting to kill him seemed very important.

"Purty sight, ain't it?" Studdal gloated.

Holt turned slowly to look at him, at the filthy face and blackened teeth. His brain, sluggish before, suddenly

snapped everything into clear, cold relief. He knew in that instant that he had been mistaken when he had decided that nothing mattered.

"Seen enough, Shepway?" Studdal grinned.

Holt glanced back down into the river valley. "Yeah, I've seen enough," he said grimly.

Studdal motioned with the gun, indicating the path down the slope up which they'd come. "All right then, let's go back. You got some diggin' to do. We don't mind coverin' you up, but I'll be damned if you don't dig the hole first." He laughed loudly.

Holt glanced apprehensively down into the arroyo. The digging had stopped. The four men sat resting and smoking. It came as a shock to Holt to discover that Chuck's body was gone. Then he saw the little mound of gypsum-sprinkled earth.

Studdal had seen it too. "The damn fools!" he muttered. "Lookit that—I told 'em to make it look natural and they've left a hump you could see a mile off. You'll have to get a shovel and level that off when we get there."

While Studdal talked Holt's mind was working frantically. It was about a hundred yards, maybe less, to the bottom of the ravine where the four men waited. Once he covered that hundred yards his doom was sealed. It had to be now or never. He glanced at Studdal out of the corner of his eye. The beefy gunman was standing at his elbow, a little behind and to Holt's left. Studdal was still looking down into the ravine, grousing. Holt tensed.

Studdal was still talking when Holt spun, left hand crashing down edgewise on Studdal's forearm in a paralyzing blow that dropped the gun from the numbed fingers. He swung his right fist in a wild haymaker at a point where the big man's paunch pressed out above the buckle of his sagging gunbelt, saw his fist disappear almost to the wrist in the pillow-like belly. Studdal's words cut off in a sickening wheeze as his breath left him and he doubled forward. Holt caught him with a straightening left that spun him half around and sent him rolling down the shale embankment beside the rocky path. He bent and retrieved the pistol just as he heard a startled yell from below. Without looking back he started in a running crouch for the top of the ridge.

The ground beside him erupted in a geyser of dirt and splintered gypsum followed by the sharp whine of the

ricochet and the bullwhip crack of the rifle. As he passed over the crest of the ridge he heard Studdal's agonized bellow from somewhere below. "Shoot him, damn you, shoot him!" But the ridge was between them now. He laughed out loud with sheer relief.

The laugh died on his lips as he plunged over the rimrock and started down the other side. The vista before him was wide and rolling—there wasn't so much as a clump of sage to offer cover. He stopped, drawing his breath in tortured gasps, glancing around him with growing despair at the barren landscape.

He turned suddenly and shot his eyes toward the Canadian. The outcropping of rimrock where it broke away toward the valley cut off his view of the water holes along the river. Undoubtedly the riders down there with Marsham's herd had heard the shot. Had he come over the crest fifty yards to the left they would have seen him plainly. As it was he was hidden from their view. But he knew full well how little time it would be before they would get the word and start combing the ridges and valleys. Studdal and his four would be mounted by now, pounding hell-bent-for-leather down the ravine to cut around it and across where the ridge tumbled down into the valley. It would take them four or five minutes, maybe less. If only he had a horse those five minutes would give him all the lead he needed.

The thought made him glance behind him at the ridge, wondering. His roan was back there in the ravine; Chuck's mount, too. There was just a chance that Studdal's bunch wouldn't expect him to turn back now that he had made a break. The question was, had they left those extra mounts behind in their haste?

He scrambled back up to the top of the ridge. The two mounts were there. He paused just long enough to sweep the length of the ravine as far as he could see to make sure the riders had gone. Then he began to pick his way carefully down the rocky slope in the deepening twilight.

Shadows were gathering deep in the ravine now and he was grateful for that. The sun had set, twilight would linger a while, then it would be full dark, making his trail almost impossible to follow.

He reached the bottom of the ravine and started toward the juniper clump where he had seen the horses tethered. Keeping to the shadows, he was just rounding

the edge of the junipers when he heard a commotion ahead. There was a sudden flurry of hoofs, then the loud splat of leather on hide followed by a steady rhythm of horses running. A second later he caught a distant glimpse of the two horses, saddles empty, fading out of sight down the darkening ravine. Cursing under his breath, Holt dodged quickly into the shelter of the junipers. Somebody had driven those mounts away deliberately. Somebody who had guessed he might try to come back for a horse. Just then the shadowy outline of a mounted man loomed down the ravine. Even in the growing darkness Holt recognized the rider's bulk. It was Studdal.

Studdal eased his mount forward, his eyes fastened on the juniper clump. Holt could feel the man's eyes trying to penetrate the darkness.

"That's far enough, Studdal!" He was surprised to hear the sound of his own voice.

The rider halted. "That you, Shepway? Well, you comin' out, or do I come get you?"

"You name it, Studdal. I want your horse—that's all I give a damn about."

Studdal chuckled. "I thought so. And you know what's gonna happen the minute you shoot, don't you? You ain't gonna have no horse. He'll spook on out of here."

Holt frowned.

"Go ahead, Shepway. Shoot."

Holt waited. The man was smart. Smart enough to know the character of the man he was against. Smart enough to know Holt wouldn't shoot and chance drawing the others back and losing the horse at the same time.

"I'm waitin', Shepway."

The movement was so faint that Holt hardly saw it at all. A faint glint of starlight on blued steel showed beneath the horse's throat. Orange flame licked out—as Holt ducked back into the shelter of the junipers.

The shot reverberated up and down the ravine and the horse whinnied and plunged. Studdal held to the mount well. A second shot crashed out as Holt darted among the junipers. He heard Studdal cursing violently because he had missed.

Holt knew full well he could not afford to fight a pitched battle. Those shots would bring the others down into the ravine in a matter of minutes. Studdal, damn him, knew it, too.

Holt dropped on his belly, slithering among the junipers till he reached the far edge. Then he circled the clump wide, running swiftly. In half a minute he had gone clear around the clump. Ahead he could see the horse. Beside it was the broad back of Studdal. The big gunman had dismounted and was peering over the animal's withers. Holt raised his Colt. Then he hesitated. Something in him revolted against backshooting, even though he knew Studdal would have shot him in the back laughing, if he had had the chance.

"Studdal!"

With a loud curse the big man spun, firing as he turned, firing wildly, desperately.

Holt winced slightly as he felt the whip of lead past his cheek, steadied, and thumbed his hammer. The juniper grove seemed to jump from the roaring concussion of shots. Studdal was a swaying figure, scant yards away, wreathed in gunsmoke. Holt heard a stricken gasp tear from the man's throat, saw the bulky shape totter, then plunge forward through the smoke and lie twitching for a minute before it quieted.

Holt stood for a moment gazing at the prostrate form, speaking softly to quiet the horse. Then he walked over, leading the animal, and prodded Studdal with his toe, turning him part way over. Studdal was dead.

## Chapter Sixteen

HALF AN HOUR'S RIDE brought Holt close to the eastern fence and he slowed to a trot, picking his way carefully until he located the wire. Dismounting, he drew his gun and hammered at the wires close to a post until the staples gave way and he had led his mount across. Then he paused for a minute, watching his back-trail in the starlight and listening. He heard nothing and nodded in satisfaction. It would be morning before Marsham's men were likely to pick up his trail. Back in the saddle he took his direction from the stars and swung southeast in the direction of the Canadian. A mile or two ahead he saw the dark outline of the hills behind the Coster ranch.

When he came to the crest of the slope behind the house he stopped and sat gazing down at the buildings standing dark and silent in the starlight. He glanced at the Big Dipper in the northern sky. It wasn't yet midnight. The Costers wouldn't have been in bed too long.

He eased his horse over the edge and began picking his way down the slope.

He was still a couple of hundred yards away when a horse whinnied in the corral below and his own mount gave answer. It puzzled him then that the house stayed dark. He was close enough now for them to have heard his hoofbeats, and the whinnying would certainly have awakened somebody. The thought came to him that perhaps Coster had decided to stay the night in Clear Creek after shipping his cattle. But that still seemed a little unlikely for a man who was leaving the territory and had a lot to do before he left. He rode on till he entered the yard and came up alongside the pole corral to dismount. It was when he saw inside the corral that he began to feel uneasy. Among the several horses there he recognized Carol's line-backed buckskin and the chestnut her dad had been riding that morning. They were home, then. He glanced back at the house. It was still in darkness. Slowly, his uneasiness increasing, he slipped quietly to the ground.

The unmistakable sound of a cartridge being levered

into a rifle chamber broke on the stillness and a voice called out, "That'll do, mister—hold it right where you are!"

Holt froze. Then he said cautiously, "Is that you, Frank?"

There was a second's hesitation. "Yeah. Who's that?"

"It's me. Holt Shepway."

He could hear Carol's voice now, low, excited. Then a bar dropped inside with a muffled thump and the door grated open. "Come on in, Holt," Frank called.

Holt crossed the yard, puzzled. Frank stood on the doorstep, a Winchester cradled on his arm. Behind him Holt could see Carol, her face a white spot against the dark interior. They stood looking at him. Nobody made a move to strike a light.

"What happened, Frank?" Holt asked. "You look like you're ready to stand off a siege."

"I thought maybe you'd be able to tell us what happened," Coster said nervously. "I hear Marsham busted through the fence this afternoon. Is that right?"

"That's right," Holt said grimly. "But how come you're all buttoned up? You sold out to Marsham. He's not likely to bother you."

Frank said nothing for a minute. Then he cleared his throat. "Holt, I—I reckon I owe you some sort of an apology." He stopped, overcome with embarrassment.

"I don't follow you, Frank," Holt said. He noticed Carol had drawn back inside as though she didn't want to hear what was coming.

"Well," Frank said slowly, "to be honest about it I thought you was lyin' to everybody about Cross W bein' short of water. Course I figured your water was your business and if you wanted to keep it, well . . ." He paused awkwardly, then went on. "I guess, like a lot of other folks around here, I started listenin' to what Clive Marsham was sayin'. But this afternoon I found out that I had more water for my cows, head for head, than you did on Cross W."

Holt knew how hard it was for Coster to have to say this. He tried to make it a little easier for him saying, "No need to apologize, Frank. If I'd had water you'd have been welcome to it. But it wasn't just water that made me want to hold that barbed wire. I had other reasons, and not the kind Marsham seems to have talked around."



"I know," Coster said sympathetically. "I found out a little about that this afternoon when some of your boys rode through here."

Holt's pulse quickened. "Through here? How long ago, Frank?"

"'Bout mid-afternoon. After Marsham broke the fence."

"Did they say how it happened?" Holt asked in a tense voice.

"Well, they was kind of puzzled, not knowin' what had happened to you and all. But it seems that Mrs. Fairbrother came ridin' up sometime this afternoon and said you and her had had a big fight and you'd told her to go to hell and then quit. She told the boys they could all do the same, that she was hirin' her own crew."

Holt gritted his teeth. "Yeah, Frank—then what?"

Coster shrugged. "They figured that if you'd quit you must have had good reason. So they started to ride back to pack their warbags. But she wouldn't let 'em. She told 'em to get the hell off Cross W and that she'd send all their gear up to Clear Creek in a wagon and they could sort it out themselves tomorrow. Well, they didn't know exactly what to do. A bunch of 'em went on into town, but Skeeter Andrews and half a dozen others come ridin' down thisaway to see if I'd heard or seen anythin' of you. They'd just about got off Cross W when they seen Marsham's herd apoundin' down across your range headed for the Canadian. That's how come I knew it had happened. They told me that you and that woman hadn't exactly seen eye to eye and they figured—"

"Which way'd they go, Frank, Skeeter and his bunch?"

"Why, they thought they'd ride on down towards Willow Creek and hole up for a day or two and kind of keep an eye out to see what the hell happened. I think they kind of had an idea somethin' might have happened to you."

Holt nodded. "Thanks, Frank. I think I'll ride down Willow Creek way and see if I can find 'em." He started to turn away, then he frowned thoughtfully. "That still doesn't explain why you're on edge, Frank. You didn't think you'd get involved in this mixup, did you?"

Coster gave a wry chuckle. "Hell, I'm already involved. Marsham wants to take over this place at sundown tomorrow. But when I stopped by the bank in town this mornin' to pick up his check for the ranch I found out that Clive Marsham and the bank ain't exactly on speakin' terms."

"You mean Marsham's *broke*?" Holt said with disbelief.

"Broke! Hell, he's not only broke. He's got Two Bar mortgaged right down to the last horseshoe. He's been operatin' on borrowed money ever since he come to this country. Everythin' he got was by fast talk—and, so the whispers go—by a fast gun."

Holt swore. "So that's why he was so damned anxious to get his hands on Cross W!"

"And on any other outfit includin' this."

"Well, good thing you found out in time, Frank."

Coster was grim. "I didn't," he said. "I had a good lesson in how easy Marsham talks folks into things. I signed the deed over to him the night he was here. I thought all I'd have to do would be to stop in town and pick up the money. So did Jack Layton."

"You mean you turned over the deed without getting your money, and Layton, too? But, hell, Frank, he can't take over unless—"

"No? He's already took over Layton's place. One of my boys brought back word just before sundown. That's where my men are now. Out keepin' their eyes open for trouble. Marsham's men are down at Layton's."

"So they moved Layton out, did they? And you're afraid you're next?"

"They didn't move him any place, Holt. They killed him."

Holt stared at the ground for a minute in silence. Then he said slowly, "It's started, Frank. Chuck's dead. Studdal killed him this noon." He raised his head to look at Coster and his face was grim in the pale starlight. "What the boys told you was partly right. I had a fight with Rhea Fairbrother all right. But it didn't end the way she said. Chuck. . . ." He stopped. Chuck was dead now. It might be kinder to his memory to change things a little. Maybe it would make up for something. "Chuck was there when Rhea hired Studdal and his bunch to replace my crew. When I rode up this noon Chuck tried to yell out and warn me. Studdal shot him."

Holt paused and gave a deep sigh. Yes, it sounded a lot better that way. And nobody would ever know the difference. "She had Studdal take me down along the Canadian while they buried Chuck's body. I was supposed to be next, but I got away." He remembered, then, some-

thing he'd forgotten to do. Mechanically, he slipped Studdal's Colt from his holster, flipped open the loading gate, ejected the empties.

Coster watched him, glanced up significantly. "Studdal?"

Holt nodded, slipping fresh cartridges into the cylinder.

Coster shook his head regretfully. "Looks like Marsham's gone clean crazy—him and that woman. I'm sorry about Chuck, Holt. I can't tell you how sorry." He raised his head and glanced down across the starlit valley. "Looks like you're right. It's started. I wonder how it's gonna end, that's the thing. I—I hate to leave here, Holt. But Marsham's got a mighty big outfit. I been thinkin' that if I could just get word to my two riders. . . . I'd hate to just pick up in the dead of night and run out on 'em. Still, I got to think about Carol. God knows what'd happen to her."

Holt stared at the ground, thinking hard. Then he looked up and said, "Where are your riders, Frank?"

"I don't know exactly, but one's down by Layton's place keepin' an eye on Marsham's men that are down there. The other one is down on the Canadian someplace watchin' the riders that are with Marsham's herd." Then he saw the thoughtful look on the Cross W foreman's face and said slowly, "Why, Holt?"

"You and Carol get saddled. You ride with her into Clear Creek. She'll be out of danger there and I don't think anybody'll bother you along the way because it looks like Marsham's gang is all down below toward the river. When you get to town you can tell my boys up there what's happened and ask them to meet me here at your place just as fast as they can make it."

Coster frowned deeply. "I'd thought of that before, Holt—about gettin' Carol up to town where she'd be safe. But, like I said before, I don't like to run out and leave—"

"I'll ride down and pick up your men, Frank. Don't worry about them. Then I aim to head for Willow Creek and pick up Skeeter and his bunch. I figure we can get back here about an hour before sunup. Marsham's crew won't be able to pick up my trail before dawn. By then it'll be too late."

"You aim to try and push 'em off Cross W?" Coster said incredulously.

"No, Frank," Holt said. "Not off Cross W. I intend to push them clear to hell out of the Texas Panhandle!" He

noddled toward the corral. "Now you'd better get saddled, Frank, and good luck. He thrust out his hand.

Coster took the hand and gripped it firmly. He seemed about to say something, but Holt had already turned and was hurrying toward the horse he'd left beside the corral.

He found his blood begin to pound with excitement as he walked. The bruises, the heartache, the lack of sleep of the past two days were forgotten momentarily. Another sleepless night lay ahead, but that didn't seem to matter now. He had till dawn to gather his scattered crew. Four hours ago he'd been deep in despair. Now he had a fighting chance. That was all he wanted.

His footsteps slowed as he neared the corral. Something seemed suddenly to detract from his feeling of excitement. A sense of disappointment gnawed at him. Then he remembered Carol's face framed for a moment in the doorway before she withdrew. He hadn't realized it then, but it had hurt him, hurt him because she still didn't know the truth about him and Rhea. Even when he had told Frank about what had happened he still hadn't bothered to go into detail about how it had all come about. He heaved a sigh and untied the reins from the corral pole.

"Holt?"

He spun around. She was coming across the yard, lifting her skirts as she ran, a white figure moving swiftly in the starlight. He waited. She slowed to a walk, then stopped altogether a few feet away. "Holt, I couldn't face you a minute ago. I—I was too ashamed, I guess, after all the awful things I'd said to you. I don't know what to say now. I—"

He moved to her quickly. "Then don't say anything," he whispered.

She raised her face to his and he could see, before he kissed her, the starlight glistening in the tears on her cheeks. But she was smiling, happily.

They drew apart after a while and he said huskily, "Now go change your clothes and get saddled. I want you out of here."

"I'm not going, Holt," she said firmly. "If we're going to fight then my place is right here with the rest of you. I can handle a gun as well as any man, you know that. All this business of getting me out of harm's way is so silly. I'm staying."

"You've got to go, Carol. Somebody's got to get word to my crew in Clear Creek. You can't go alone and you can't stay here alone. So maybe you'd better learn early who's going to wear the pants in this family." He grinned at her and said, "Now get moving."

"All right. I'll go. But I'm coming back with Dad. I'm not going to sit up there in some hotel room, not knowing what's happening, worrying myself sick."

"Suit yourself," Holt said easily. "Only get going."

She threw her arms about him suddenly and pressed her head against his chest. "Be careful. Please be careful, Holt. I'd hate to lose you—again." Then she turned and ran back across the yard. As he swung out of the gate he looked back. She was still standing there, waving to him. He waved back. Then he turned and spurred his horse toward the Canadian. What a hell of a thing, he thought suddenly, if he should die now.

## Chapter Seventeen

HOLT SAT ATOP the pole corral at the Coster ranch smoking thoughtfully, the glow of his cigarette a faint pinpoint in the darkness. He took a final deep drag on the quirley and flipped it behind him into the dry dust of the corral.

"You ought to try and get some sleep, Holt," a Cross W rider murmured quietly from the ground below. "You ain't closed your eyes in two nights."

"I feel all right," Holt snapped irritably. But he knew he didn't. His irritation was at himself more than the rider who'd spoken. Twice already he'd found himself dozing and wakened in time to catch himself from falling from his perch. He glanced uneasily over his shoulder to the east. Was it imagination, or was there a lighter patch beginning to show in the sky above the hills? He glanced at the sky, searching for the Big Dipper. But the patches of drifting cloud had all but obscured the stars.

"It'll be daylight soon," somebody said from the ground. "What we gonna do, Holt, if that other bunch don't get here?"

That was the question that bothered Holt himself. "They'll be here," he said firmly. But even as he spoke he shifted his gaze to the faint line of the ridge beyond the slope to the north. If Carol and her dad had made the trip unmolested then Frank Coster should be on his way back with the rest of the crew by now. He found himself grinding his teeth together with tension. If they didn't get here soon . . .

"Somebody's comin'," a rider spoke from below.

Holt scanned the ridge to the north again. "I don't see anybody," he muttered. But even as he spoke he heard the sound of hoofbeats and jerked his head around. It was a rider coming fast up the slope from the direction of the Canadian.

"Somethin's happened," somebody said. There was a rustle of movement as Frank Coster's two men and the half-dozen Cross W hands scurried to their feet.

"Hell, it's Skeeter Andrews!"

Holt had already identified the rider and was clambering down from the corral to join the tense knot of men grouping themselves at the gate. They waited in grim silence as the hoofbeats grew louder, watching the rider cross a shallow arroyo some distance away. Holt swore under his breath. It could only mean one thing, Holt realized. They had waited too long. Marsham was on the move. He swore again, this time aloud as he glanced over his shoulder to the north. "Damn! What the hell's happened to the rest of them?"

Skeeter came through the gate into the yard, reining to a sliding halt and peering into the darkness. "Holt? Where's Holt Shepway?"

"Right here, Skeet. What's up?"

"Marsham's comin' here. I guess he aims to give Coster the same thing he gave Jack Layton."

"How far away are they?" Holt asked.

"Three, four miles."

"The whole outfit?"

Skeeter nodded. "I counted thirty-five riders. That leaves a handful on night herd. Studdal's gun hands are with 'em, too."

"How fast they moving?" Holt said quickly.

"They're takin' it easy. I guess they figure there's no hurry. They don't know we're here so they're satisfied they've got an easy job ahead."

Holt rubbed thoughtfully at the stubble on his chin. He glanced at Skeeter's lathered mount. "All right, Skeet. Saddle a fresh horse. Put that one inside in a stall where it won't be seen. Then get the hell up the slope to the north and see if you can locate that bunch from town. Maybe it's better it turned out this way. If we can coax Marsham in here we might catch him between two fires. Then it'll be all over but the shooting." A wry smile crossed his face. "Speaking of shooting," he said, "the first man who takes a shot at Marsham loses a month's pay. I want him for myself."

Holt turned around and peered east again. Dawn was breaking. It would be light enough to see in another half-hour. Marsham should be here by then. He found cause for sober reflection in the thought that it would be the last daybreak one of them would ever see.

He shifted his gaze back to the immediate area, running his eyes over the shallow arroyos lining the slope, marking

the few clumps of sage and greasewood dotting the surrounding landscape. Not much in the way of cover for either attackers or defenders. He contemplated the house, the outbuildings. Stout cottonwood logs and heavy sod roofs. He couldn't have asked for a better fortress. Let Marsham's gang have the greasewood and shallow arroyos.

"All right, boys," he said finally, "crowd as many mounts inside the stable as you can. Keep them saddled; we might need them in a hurry. Unsaddle the few you have to leave outside, but make it mighty few. I want the place to look as natural as possible. Then four of you come with me inside the house. The other four can take cover in the outbuildings."

Skeeter came out of the corral leading a fresh mount. He stopped to touch a match to a cigarette as Holt walked over to him. "Anythin' in particular you want me to do with this bunch, Holt? Providin' I find 'em, that is."

"Yeah. Stay out of sight as much as possible on your way down here. It'll be daylight soon and I don't want Marsham to see a soul around the place. If you get here before he does, keep a lookout from the ridge up there. When you get a chance, spread out on either side and bottle them up so's they can't head back for the Canadian."

Skeeter nodded. Then he said hesitantly, "Holt—I ain't tellin' you what to do, but don't go gettin' any wild ideas about a fancy showdown with Clive Marsham. That's not all just talk about him bein' handy with a gun. He might look like a dude, but he's fast as a snake with a smoke pole. You can have him if you want him for your own, but don't take no foolish chances. Use your Winchester and keep that Colt to show your grandkids."

Holt smiled broadly as Skeeter mounted up. "All right, Skeet. I'll watch myself. You do the same."

Skeeter grinned as he swung out of the gate. "Don't worry 'bout me, Holt. I aim to live to be a hundred and four and get shot by a jealous husband through a hotel-room window!"

Holt watched him till he faded from sight, then turned his attention to the activity in the corral behind him. One of his riders came up and spoke to them through the poles. "We managed to get all of 'em inside but four, Holt."

Holt nodded, picking up his Winchester from beside



a post. "Fine. Close the door so's they don't get out when the shooting starts, then four of you come with me. You men who're staying out here keep yourselves under cover and don't start anything until you hear me shoot. Savvy?"

He stalked across the yard toward the house, glancing once more at the ridge to the north, now growing plainer in the increasing dawn. For a minute he regretted having sent Skeeter toward Clear Creek to find Coster and the others; he felt he should have gone himself. He couldn't shake off the uneasy feeling that something had happened to Coster and Carol. Still, he couldn't be both places at once and it might look like he was running out on the fight at the last minue.

As a precaution he busied the men drawing bucket after bucket of water from the spring well which was still fed by a trickle from an underground stream. Every conceivable container inside the cabin was filled. They were only nine against a possible thirty or forty. It might be that the others would never come. It could be a long siege. Holt watched the four men outside roll a barrel of water into one of the outbuildings just as the first orange rim of sunlight touched the eastern hills. Then he dropped the heavy bar into place across the door and sat down to wait.

For a few minutes the orange light held, then changed to soft gold that soon melted white-hot as the sun climbed above the horizon. Inside the house the riders spread themselves at vantage points through the two rooms, taking up positions at windows, knocking holes in the chinked log walls to permit free use of their rifles. They cracked careless jokes, passed comments from room to room, but after a while they stopped and a somber mood seemed to creep in along with the heat from the valley.

"Here they come!"

The words were spoken quietly and although there was no movement, no flurry of excitement, it seemed as if the hush that followed was audible enough in itself. Through the kitchen window Holt saw the antlike procession of riders coming up the valley, coming in a confident group without bothering to spread out. He counted them carefully. Thirty-five. Thirty-five men riding cockily up the slope to throw terror into three men and a girl. Holt smiled thinly as he thought of the surprise that awaited them.

There was a metallic clatter and a muttered curse as

someone in the next room dropped a handful of cartridges. Holt gritted his teeth. The necessity for silence now was obvious. He gauged the distance separating them from the oncoming riders. About a mile now, maybe less. There was time for a last smoke, maybe his last one ever. He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply, his eyes on the black-suited man riding at their head.

This is your last ride, Marsham, he thought. You don't know it yet, but before this day is out I'm going to make you pay for everything you've done—to me, to Old John, to Chuck, to Cross W. I promised once I'd see you in hell before you took this range from me and, by God, I meant it.

## Chapter Eighteen

MARSHAM'S MEN came on, taking their time. They took an eternity to cross the shallow arroyo just a hundred and fifty yards away. Now they were across. A hundred yards now. Fifty. Twenty-five.

The first of the riders was swinging through the gate when bedlam broke out in the corral below the house. A series of sharp, angry whinnies accompanied by sudden thumps and the sound of splintered wood as the tightly-packed horses skittered in nervousness. The riders drew up short just outside the gate and Holt swore fluently. But the damage was done. The sound of that many horses scuffling in the tiny stable caused Marsham to hold up his hand in a gesture of caution and cast a suspicious glance around the yard. His eyes noted the dust through the gate and beside the corral where it had been trampled by a number of restless hoofs, and Holt could see the puzzled frown spread on his dark face. Marsham said something over his shoulder to his men and there was a flurry of sound as hammers were thumbed back in readiness.

The excitement was contagious. Hammers clacked inside the house as the nervous riders followed suit. "Not yet, dammit—hold it!" Holt hissed.

"Coster!" Marsham's voice rang out sharp and clear on the morning air. He waited a while, then when there was no answer he glanced uneasily in the direction of the stable from which the noise had since subsided. Whipping out his Colt, he fired a shot into the air and sat waiting for the echoes to die away among the hills. Then he called again. "Coster, if you're in there you'd better speak up!"

Holt turned around quickly and cast a glance out the opposite window at the slope behind. But the rise of the slope was too steep for him to see clear to the top of the ridge. He called quickly across to the man at the other window. "Any sign of Skeeter and the rest of the boys?" The man surveyed the slope carefully, then slowly shook his head. "Nope. Not a whisker."

Holt gripped his gun and turned around again. If things broke too soon they might find things turning against them. Thirty-five men could pour out a hell of a lot of

lead. On the other hand if Holt and his handful of defenders worked the element of surprise to their advantage they might considerably reduce the thirty-five out there in the first volley.

But he did not want a partial victory. To kill or wound a few and permit the others to escape would only prolong the situation into a long and bloody range war. He wanted to end it, decisively, here and now. If Marsham's men broke and scattered they could be well beyond reach before Holt and his men could reach the corral and give pursuit. If only Skeeter would find the others and cut off any possible retreat.

His anxious thoughts were suddenly interrupted by something that was happening out by the gate. One of Marsham's men had dismounted and was walking toward the corral to investigate the reason for the disturbance. Every second counted now. Every minute might bring Skeeter and the others as much as half a mile closer. Holt gripped the stock of his Winchester and lined up his sights, moving them along the ground a few inches in advance of the man's dusty boots as he walked. He could afford to let him get so far, then no farther. He couldn't risk having those mounts turned out and free to run.

The man threw a leg over the lowest corral post and slipped between the bars, crossing toward the closed stable door. He was three feet from the door and reaching out to unfasten it when Holt yelled.

"That's far enough, mister!"

The man froze in his tracks, glancing first towards the house, then uneasily back at Marsham. Holt held the man in his sights and called out to the Two Bar owner, "You looking for somebody, Marsham?"

Marsham's face showed his surprise as he recognized the voice. "Who's that?" he inquired cautiously.

"You know damn well who it is. Now answer my question—are you looking for somebody?"

Before Marsham could answer, the man behind Holt whispered excitedly, "Holt! I just seen somebody on the ridge. Looked like Skeeter, but I ain't sure. He crawled up to the edge of the rimrock and took one good look and then pulled back outta sight."

Holt's face broke into a grim smile of satisfaction. "Good! You boys in the other room there keep an eye along the ridge down to the Canadian and let me know the

minute you see any of our bunch moving into position. I'll try to keep Marsham talking a little while longer."

Marsham was saying something and Holt could only catch the tail end of it, "... talk to Frank Coster. Is he there?"

"Maybe he is and maybe he's not," Holt said. "What do you want to talk to him about?"

"Damn you, Shepway, it's none of your business what I want with him!"

"All right then," Holt said, "as of right now I'm making it my business. Now what the hell do you want?"

Marsham's face flushed angrily. He glanced uncertainly at the outbuildings, then back to the house. When he spoke this time he had softened his tone a little. "I bought this ranch from Coster. He's supposed to move out by tonight and I thought I'd just ride up and talk it over with him, that's all."

"Like you talked it over with Jack Layton?"

He saw Marsham's startled look. "I don't know what you're talking about, Shepway. But I'm getting sick and tired of this nonsense and—"

"They're there, Holt! I just seen two riders movin' down over the rimrock past that bunch of junipers."

Holt glanced off to the southwest along the ridge in time to catch a glimpse of a rider disappearing among the trees. The junipers along the ridge were a good quarter of a mile away. Marsham was cut off. He jerked his gaze back to the yard.

"Marsham, let's talk straight. I know about Jack Layton. I know how you bought this place from Coster. And I know what I told you was going to happen to anybody who busted through Cross W fence."

"The new owner of Cross W gave me permission to move my cattle onto Cross W range."

"The hell you say!" Holt said. "And she also gave Stud-dal permission to kill my brother and to try to kill me." His tone grew suddenly harsh, his words snapped with the cold clarity of steel striking steel. "Now listen to me, Marsham. You're through murdering people and stealing their land. You didn't know it, but when you rode across that arroyo back there you rode the last hundred yards you'll ever ride alive."

The movement of Marsham's head was almost imperceptible as he nodded to the man still standing beside the stable

Coster grinned, nodding. "Yeah, but I had one hell of a time gettin' her to stay in town. If I hadn't—"

But Holt, relieved to find she was safe, was no longer listening. He took one more look around and interrupted Frank Coster's tale of how he'd got Carol to stay in Clear Creek. "Frank, I don't see Marsham any place."

"Why, I thought I saw Skeeter cut off part of that bunch Marsham was ridin' with when they tried to hit for the Canadian."

Holt's face tensed. "Nope," he said tersely. "Skeet thought he was up here. Well, that settles it. He got away." He reined his mount around suddenly and gazed down the valley, his brow furrowed in thought. "But I know just where I can find him, Frank. I'll bet he's riding up to get her right this minute."

"What are you going to do?" asked Frank.

"Stop him," answered Holt, and he galloped away.

Just then Skeeter reined up. He turned to Frank, and then looked after the retreating figure. "The damn fool! He'll get himself killed. I hope I ain't too late to stop him," he said suddenly, racing across the yard toward his horse.

## Chapter Nineteen

HOLT SPURRED HIS MOUNT grimly as the foam-flecked animal faltered on a rise, recovered, then clattered toward the crest and over, trailing a cloud of dust. Just over the rise a sudden coolness brushed his cheek and he squinted his eyes in disbelief at the far horizon. A dark line of clouds lay there, like a dirty roll of cotton, moving slowly down out of the northwest. Holt followed the line with his eyes, saw the extent of its reach, knew the ironical truth. Rain! He could smell it now on the breeze, cool and sweet, borne on the advancing wind. It had come too late, but it had finally come.

Drops had begun to fall by the time he reached the cottonwoods in the flat beside the Cross W outbuildings. A thin steady patter falling reluctantly from the leaden sky. He paused for a moment, listening to the intermittent rustle of raindrops striking the parched leaves overhead. But he listened without actually hearing. Rain didn't matter now.

His gaze swept the outbuildings standing familiar and silent across the flat, moved on to the house. Then he saw it. The horse, still saddled and standing beside the front gate where Marsham had left it. Unconsciously he lifted his Colt from its holster and let it drop back, testing its movement. Twice he did this, then he eased the horse forward out of the trees and rode slowly across the flat toward the house, the buildings spread before him, silent in the humid hush of noon. He felt the tense expectancy increase within him, building up like static electricity builds up inside a thunderstorm, waiting to explode. Wisps of steam floated like ghostly ribbons across the ground as the drizzling rain mingled with parched dust and scorched, withering vegetation. Droplets clung glistening to his hair, ran in little rivulets down his face to hang quivering and drop from his chin. Smell of wet leather, wet horse, wet man. He was unmindful of the fact that he wore no hat, unmindful of the rain itself. His full concentration was upon the house. He watched it, shifting his eyes from window to door to window. They must be in there. Both of

them. Maybe they had seen him by now. That was good. He wanted them to see him; wanted them to know he had come.

He turned just out of rifle range and kept that distance, circling slowly toward the outbuildings till he put them between himself and the house. He quickened his pace a little then, riding up to dismount beside the corral. A hackamore hung from one of the poles and he slipped the rope around the roan's neck and tied it firmly to the corral. The reins alone might not hold if gunfire caused the mount to rear.

Slipping the Winchester back into its boot he felt for his Colt, testing it once again; then he started forward, cautiously, crouching, peering between the poles as he circled the corral.

He came up beside the bunkhouse and listened. Only the thin hiss of rain met his ears. He moved closer, craning his neck around the corner for a look at the house. Something moved beside a window and he tensed, his jaw tightening. Then he saw it was only the faint breeze stirring the net curtain through the open window and he relaxed a little.

His eyes ran to Marsham's horse standing beside the gate watching him. It gave him grim consolation to think they couldn't get away from him now. Not both of them on that one tired horse. He wondered about Rhea, wondered what she would do. She wouldn't stop at killing him, he knew that. She had tried it already. But he frowned as he wondered again if he could bring himself to shoot a woman. He might, he thought, if it were necessary.

He tensed again and listened as another sound crept into his consciousness above the gentle swish of rain. At first he thought it was the wind sighing in the trees, until he looked and saw they were standing almost still. He heard it again and this time he recognized it. Inside the house a woman was crying softly. Rhea? He wondered. Maybe Marsham had been hit. Maybe he had ridden all this way with blood pumping from a wound and had died when he got to her.

No. The whole idea of Rhea crying because anybody had died was laughable.

"Marsham!" he called suddenly.

His voice bounced back at him from the house and the



crying stopped. There was silence for a long minute then he called again. "Marsham, I've come to get you. You might as well come on out."

Then he heard his name called from within. "Don Holt! *Por Dios*, you have come back! They have gone, Don Holt, *el diablo Marsham y—*"

He was up and sprinting across the yard. Gone! They had gone, how? He was almost to the gate, cursing under his breath, when it occurred to him suddenly that it might be a trap!

Jumping behind the big cottonwood in the yard he pressed himself flat against it, breathing heavily, sweat running down his face. He waited a minute, confusion muddling his brain. If it had been a trap Marsham could easily have shot him before he reached the tree. Still . . .

"Maria!"

She was sobbing again, calling his name incoherently. He peered around the tree, cautiously, the Colt ready in his hand. Then he knew it was no trap. Through the open door he could see her. She was sprawled on the floor just inside the door, a dark liquid stain spreading beside her. "Don Holt!" she called feebly.

He was up the steps and kneeling beside her, his eyes noticing the ancient shotgun just beyond her outstretched hand. He made a grimace when he saw the gaping wound in her breast. Tenderly he raised the tired old head and looked down on the wrinkled parchment face contorted in pain. "Maria!" he said huskily. "Did he do this?"

She opened her eyes and shook her head feebly. "No . . . it was the *señora* . . . she is the mother of the Devil, Don Holt . . . *la madre del Diablo!*" Then she became excited, struggling to raise herself, pointing feebly toward the door and speaking rapidly in Spanish with Holt catching only a word here and there. He tried to calm her, to get her to speak English.

"Easy Maria. *Yo comprendo poco Español; habla Ingles!*"

"*Si, si . . .* forgive me, I forget."

He came here, riding like the devil he is, that Marsham. Oh, for so long I have seen this coming, Don Holt. . . . Between them I saw it growing. If only I had had the courage to speak it to you sooner, perhaps this would not . . ."

"Yes, yes," Holt said impatiently. "I knew about that,

Maria. But, quickly, tell me what happened. Which way did they go?"

"He came in and told her there was a big fight and that they were in danger and must go away quickly. There would be a train for the East, he said."

Holt's mind was racing. A train! Yes, there was an eastbound train sometime shortly after noon. But, good God, it was almost noon now! And it was twenty miles to Clear Creek.

"I tried to stop them, Don Holt. The old gun . . . I took it down and walked into the room. Then—then she . . ." She winced with pain, closed her eyes for a moment. "She shot me. And he—was laughing while she did it, Don Holt! Ay! *Está un diablo muy malo. . . .*!"

"Listen, Maria," Holt said gently. "I'll ride into town and send the doctor. I don't want to move you, it might be dangerous, *comprende?* You will be all right, Maria. The doctor will come quickly and then . . ."

He stopped. There would be no need to send the doctor now. He eased the fragile old body to the floor, his jaw tightening. Then he thought of the train and stood up. There was a mistiness in his eyes that made the trees and buildings blur as he ran across the yard toward the corral.

He sprinted past the wagon barn and noticed the buckboard was missing. He understood now why Marsham's horse was still beside the gate. When he reached the point where he had left the roan he stopped. The horse had been ridden hard already. It would take time to switch the saddle, but that time might be saved if he had a fresh mount. He was reaching for the latigo to unsaddle when he saw something that made him stop. The corral gate, he noticed now, had been left open. Marsham had been smart, right up to the last. Holt spun around and glanced at Marsham's own mount still standing outside the gate. The dried sweat patches still stood out despite the drizzling rain. He untied the roan and swung into the saddle. He gave the horse its head, let it set its own pace. A smile touched his face briefly as the roan, seeming to sense the urgency, stretched its legs till they seemed to be flying over the ground, heading across the flat toward the hills.

He was two miles out of town when he saw the train faintly through the driving rain. Black smoke rolled from its funnel, dropping low over the prairie behind as the

pelting rain drove it downward. Holt spurred the lathered blue to a new effort, felt its hoofs slip once in the mushy earth, then regain its stride. It was raining hard now, falling in sheets as it drifted steadily down from the northwest, soaking into the thirsty ground, turning it into a quagmire. He heard the train's whistle and he knew that was the signal it was getting near. A mile and a half ahead he saw the huddled gray buildings of the town glistening in the downpour. Beyond them, like a beacon, was the squat yellow box of the depot. He drove the roan forward, shutting his eyes against the stinging rain.

People taking shelter under the wooden awnings along the boardwalk looked up in surprise as the hatless figure on the rain-splashed blue roan cut across the corner of the town toward where the noon train east stood panting beside the platform. Cries of exclamation rippled up and down the street as they recognized the rider. A handful, sensing something on the wind, pulled their hats low and began running toward the depot, splashing ankle-deep in the red mud. Then two figures emerged from the depot onto the platform. One was a woman. The other a tall, sallow-faced man dressed in a black broadcloth suit. The running figures halted in the street. "Godamighty!" somebody said. "That's Clive Marsham comin' out of the depot. Somethin' gonna pop sure as hell!" They started running again, this time for the shelter of the buildings along the boardwalk, where they took refuge behind closed doors and peered anxiously through rain-streaked panes.

Holt brought the blue to a skidding halt beside the depot and jumped from the saddle. He had a brief glimpse of Jeb Miller's face at the dispatcher's window, his pale face drawn as he saw Holt start up the platform steps.

Marsham was holding a carpetbag in one hand and helping Rhea into the car with the other. The puffing and hissing of the engine, the drumming of rain on the corrugated tin roof of the depot had drowned the sodden clatter of approaching hoofs. Rhea had just stepped up into the car and Marsham was about to follow when he saw Holt come up the steps at the far end of the platform.

Holt saw the expression on Marsham's face change from astonishment to anticipation when the man saw Holt was alone. Marsham whispered something and laughed, and Holt saw Rhea's face for a brief instant as she peered from the door of the car to look at him. But his gaze was now

on Marsham as the man handed the carpetbag to someone inside the train and turned to meet him.

"Going someplace, Marsham?" Holt said; his boots thumping slowly on the wooden platform. He remembered what Skeeter had said: "He's deadlier than a snake and twice as fast with a smoke pole!"

"Yeah, Shepway," Marsham grinned, his white teeth clutched confidently around a cheroot, "I'm going someplace. Why? You wouldn't want to try and stop me, would you?" The long lean fingers slid down the lapel of the broadcloth coat, flicking the tail aside with easy deliberation without straying too near the gun.

Holt stook a step forward, cautiously, then stood still, spraddle-legged. There was just a vague impression of passengers huddling down between the seats in the coach alongside. His throat felt cotton dry and there was a brassy taste in his mouth. The man before him seemed a mile tall; a black figure with a broad leer, long lean fingers. The rain felt suddenly cold through his shirt plastered against his back, and he felt a shiver run down his spine.

The train gave a shrill, impatient whistle.

"You're not getting on that train, Marsham."

The engineer gave another tug at the whistle and the rain gave a spasmodic jerk and began moving slowly. Marsham started backing, slowly, to keep pace with the moving train. "No?" he laughed. "Try and stop me!"

He half-turned as though to leap for the train; then he spun back, right hand darting downward, his feet wide for balance, still laughing as his gun came leaping into his hand.

Holt saw the movement, dived for his gun, felt the butt slip in his wet hand as the Colt seemed to stick in the rain-sodden holster. Marsham was a laughing blur before him, one lean white hand moving up with a deadly swiftness. The gun seemed a dead weight in Holt's hand, the hammer felt stiff and rusted and his finger fumbled on the trigger.

The roar and clatter of the train drowned the roar of shots into insignificance. Holt was conscious only of an eternity of blossoming puffs of smoke, the awkward movement of his fingers on the gun, the tightness in his belly as he braced himself against the impact of slugs.

Then Marsham was suddenly no longer tall. He seemed

to melt away in the rain, the grinning face glancing once at Holt in surprise before it disappeared among the sodden heap of black cloth on the depot platform.

The train was a whispering clatter dying in the distance, then it was gone. Holt stood there, staring at the crumpled heap on the wet boards. In his ears came the steady dripping of the rain from the eaves of the depot. The silence made him seem suddenly tired, suddenly aware that he hadn't slept for days. The unexpected relaxation of tension staggered him. His arm holding the gun hung limply at his side and he weaved unsteadily on his feet.

"Holt!"

It was a second before the cry penetrated. He turned on groggy legs. Then she saw her, honey hair hanging wet and sleek from the pouring rain, lifting her skirts as she ran stumbling through the mud and up the steps, calling his name. Then she was in his arms and crying softly and he could smell the sweet cleanness of her hair against her cheek. "Carol," he said quietly. Then he smiled faintly as she looked up into his eyes. "It's all over now, Carol."

"You all right, Holt?" It was Jeb Mitchell's voice inquiring cautiously from the station doorway.

Holt turned around slowly. Jeb reminded him of something, what was it? Then it came to him. "Yeah, I'm all right, Jeb. But I want you to send a telegram. What's the first big town that train will stop at?"

"Why, Wichita, I reckon."

"Then send a telegram to the Wichita police to meet that train and pick up a woman called Rhea Fairbrother."

He glanced down the track. The train was only a black plume of smoke etched faintly on the rain-drenched horizon. This time, he thought, she won't be able to sway the jury. This time it will be different.

"Holt."

He turned back to her, smiling now. "Yeah, Carol?"

She plucked at his wet shirt. "Come in out of the rain. You're liable to catch cold."

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